THE BLACK CURTAIN

FLORA HAINES LOUGHEAD

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By Mrs. Loughead

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THE BLACK CURTAIN

BY

FLORA HAINES LOUGHEAD

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Singer and Painter	1
II.	Laying down the Law	5
III.	A Friend in Need	21
IV.	A Warrant that was not sworn	25
V.	Miss Judith's Investment	31
VI.	Under Siege	37
VII.	A Willful Woman	51
VIII.	An Armistice	63
IX.	The Black Curtain	69
X.	An Alarming Discovery	75
XI.	A Subterranean Volley	89
XII.	Mr. Paul to the Rescue	97
XIII.	Miss Judith feels the Influence of the Black Curtain	108
XIV.	Out of the Shadow	118
XV.	Good Comrades	121
XVI.	A Letter	137
XVII.	Miss Judith's Disappearance	141
XVIII.	A Mysterious Tryst	159
XIX.	A Stormy Interview	164
XX.	Boy and Man	168
XXI.	An Old Friend	184
XXII.	An Appeal for Clemency	194
XXIII.	A Mountain of Gold	198
XXIV.	A Startling Announcement	207
XXV.	Rob tells his Story	212
XXVI.	"Waiting till the Clouds pass by"	217
XXVII.	The Treasure-Seekers	222
XXVIII.	Winged Riches	231
XXIX.	The Interviewer interviewed	239
XXX.	Calamity	246
XXXI.	A Coward meets his Deserts	253

XXXII. Heroism 260
XXXIII. Mr. Paul behind the Black Curtain . 270
XXXIV. Rob receives a Commission . . . 275
XXXV. On the Track of a Counterfeiter . . 279
XXXVI. The Man in the Private Car . . . 284
XXXVII. Rob's Political Conversion 290
XXXVIII. A Chapter of Revelations . . . 298
XXXIX. The Sheriff meets his Waterloo . . 302
XL. The Black Curtain is lifted . . . 309
XLI. The Black Curtain falls 319
XLII. The History of the Black Curtain . 322
XLIII. Cross Purposes 329
XLIV. Bohemians to the Rescue 333
XLV. The Woman of the Portrait . . . 343
XLVI. "The Dearest Woman in the World" . 347
XLVII. Amy Judith's Opportunity 351
XLVIII. Renunciation 357
XLIX. Light in Darkness 363

THE BLACK CURTAIN

CHAPTER I

SINGER AND PAINTER

ONE night a great audience gathered in a fashionable hall to listen to a voice.

It is only once in many years that a voice is born into the world to rejoice all mankind with its sweetness and power. Even then, the precious gift is often misused and injured beyond repair before it has won recognition. This voice had been protected and nurtured and trained like some rare and sensitive plant, and it had expanded and taken to itself new grace and melody, as the plant puts forth buds and blossoms and grows apace. The critic had heard it and been unstinted in his praise; and the dilettante had listened and almost forgotten to find fault; and now the common multitude were waiting to render the final verdict.

The singer faced the people without fear. Her time of triumph was at hand, but she thought not of self nor of the plaudits of her hearers. To her the voice was a divine gift, to be divinely used. When she sang she forgot self, forgot her listeners; all that

was earthly fell away, and she reached upward to the stars.

The orchestra played an inspiriting strain, which died away in a low, faint prelude. There was a hush throughout the hall, and the people waited in pleased expectancy as the girl began to sing the famous aria from Norma.

But why the uneasy stir throughout the house, the disappointed glances, the spots of flame that glowed in the singer's pale cheeks, her startled and appealing eyes?

Instead of a pure, sweet volume of melody welling from an inexhaustible fountain, her notes were like the pealing of a muffled bell. She sang bravely on, summoning all her strength and all her art to conquer the strange huskiness that was overpowering her. Those who watched her closely saw her slight form tremble and sway, the bright flush on her face fade into a deathly pallor, the unshed tears gather in her eyes. Then, while the same appalling silence prevailed throughout the audience, she turned and left the stage, an uncrowned little Queen of Song, dethroned with her foot on the royal dais.

The thoughtless exposure of an hour had ruined the promise of a lifetime, and the voice was slain.

And the singer went out into the darkness and the night.

That same day a painter finished a commission on which he had been working early and late, and turned from the order of his patron to set down on canvas, before the mood should fail him, an inspira-

tion of his own soul. He mixed his colors and plied his brush with feverish haste, for the light of day was waning. Diligently as he labored, it was fruitless effort. His wonted cunning, that mingling of delicate fancy and consummate skill which had made him the foremost man of the day in the younger ranks of his profession, seemed suddenly to have failed him. A strange blur was on the canvas. The room seemed to reel about him. A brother artist came into the studio and watched him for awhile in silence. At length he spoke : —

" Hang it, Armitage ! What are you trying to do, anyway ? Is that a brook or a road ? Is this a tree or a man ? And why in art should you paint that sky green ? Is this some latest fantasy of the French landscape school ? "

Armitage caught the tone of genuine vexation underlying his comrade's badinage, and realized that he was sincere. He stood off and surveyed the canvas, but could see only a meaningless daub of form and color. He turned to the picture he had completed that morning, and which had already received his patron's praises and the gracious approval of the press. A singular haze seemed to obscure it.

" It 's all one to me, Lane. I believe my brain is going."

" Nonsense, Armitage ! It 's not so bad as that. But if I were you, I 'd see an oculist without delay."

The next day Armitage received his verdict. His career was ended. Unless he should put aside brush and palette, and give himself to a wholly different vocation, the man who had given so many delightful

visions to humanity, and whose future no man in his profession had dared to measure, must sit in darkness all his life.

Thus wantonly does Fate weave her web, only to cut the threads at the moment when the design is well-nigh perfected, and the strivings of a lifetime near their fruition.

CHAPTER II

LAYING DOWN THE LAW

A PLEASANT brook, having its source in the high mountains, and flowing down through wooded foothills of the Coast Range to join the larger stream which breaks the monotony of the broad valley below, beyond which a dimpling sheet of sunshine marks the beginning of the vast western sea. Above the brook, on one side, a steep bluff, terminating in a noble tableland, where clumps of live-oaks spread cool shadows over the parched grasses of early summer. On the other side of the stream a long, level strip of rich alluvial land, but slightly elevated above it and covered with a stately growth of sycamores and alders. In the bed of the brook mossy boulders interrupt the crystal current or overhang dark pools where glittering shapes with rainbow tints flash swiftly from sunlight to shadow. Tangles of wild blackberry vines, roped through and through with late blooming clematis, cover the ground, and birds sing gayly in the leafy thickets overhead, or dart downward to dip their soft plumage in the shallows and to slake parched little throats, poised on projecting stones in mid-stream.

On the high ground to the west of the gulch a woman superintended the erection of an extraordinary dwelling-house. This structure was being un-

loaded from a large farm-wagon, drawn by four stout horses, and it was being set up in sections. The builder, a gaunt, elderly man, with a kindly twinkle in his eye, could not repress a certain humorous gratification which he felt in this triumph of modern ingenuity.

When he reached a certain stage, he stood off and reviewed his work with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"Give a woman her head, and it beats all how she 'll contrive!" he cordially attested. "We 've only got to clap on the roof," indicating something resembling a huge jointed sheet of pasteboard, which was leaning against an oak tree near by, "hang on the doors and sashes, and set this truck inside," waving his hand in the direction of a tiny gasoline stove, a couple of chairs, a tiny dresser, a spring mattress on short legs, a bamboo table, and several boxes, "and I 'll eat my head, Miss Judith, if you won't have the neatest, snuggest little cabin in the Vernal Hills. House, owner, and furniture all packed up here in one load, and not a very heavy one at that!" He chuckled again, glancing at the slight figure standing in the shadow of the gnarled oak.

The woman resented this reference to her stature, drawing herself up rather stiffly and lifting her head proudly, so that a pert little chin became the most conspicuous feature of the small face hidden beneath an odd little shaker bonnet, with dark blue binding, puffed crown, and frill.

"I — I 'm sure Jack — Jack — Jack's beanstalk was n't a cir-cir-circumstance to it. And it 's got a heap better foun-foundations, to say nothing of no

ogre waiting to gob-gobble you!" attested a tall, lanky youth who had been eagerly assisting in the erection of this unique domicile.

"Now you, Orlando, you shut up and tend to business. What you mean, anyhow, trying to skeer Miss Judith, talking about ogres an' sech like?" demanded the old man severely, calling his errant scion to strict account. "'T ain't altogether the boy's fault, ma'am," he hastened to explain. "He 's a regular bookworm, Orlando is, an' his maw she 's always been encouraging him to read story-books. He can't swallow his ham an' eggs of a morning, if you 'll believe me, without a book propped up afore him."

"Oh, I 'm not in the least afraid," returned the lady lightly. "And as for ogres, I 'm quite used to them. I 've been meeting them all my life, at every turn of my path."

Both men looked mystified. The older was plainly disposed to institute an inquiry into the lady's sanity, then and there.

"At present there is, fortunately, no ogre to trouble my castle; and if you hurry, Mr. Birdsall," she slyly added, "I really believe you can get my house all up in another hour."

At this unmistakable hint the two resumed their labors, while the lady began unpacking some dainty sash curtains and various feminine fittings and adornments, and gravely entered upon the task of furnishing her dwelling while the builders were giving it the finishing touches.

Having hung several swinging sashes in the win-

dow casements, and tested the front door, which swung noiselessly on its hinges, and was supplied with a nicely fitting bolt of ponderous size, out of all proportion to the strength and resistance of the edifice it was designed to protect, farmer Birdsall untied his patient team and prepared to return to the valley below, promising the lady that he would always be on hand to render her any required service, an assurance young Orlando echoed with an unction that did amends for his halting speech.

The lady listened absently; her attention seemed to be directed to some sound up the cañon.

"What is that?" she asked sharply. "I have been hearing it all the morning."

All hearkened. From across the gulch came the unmistakable thud of an axe, muffled by the bank of mist that had drifted up from the sea the preceding night, and was slowly dissolving in the afternoon sunshine. The crags above echoed the sound.

"I swan!" exclaimed Birdsall the father, dropping the lines and preparing to laboriously descend from his elevated seat.

"It is some one on my land," declared the woman indignantly.

"Some blamed old greasers. They 're always cutting down oak timber wherever they can get a hold on 't. Now, I just would n't wonder if 't was that Cota crowd that lives over the slope yon, a clear three mile away. They 're harmless enough; got three hundred acres as prime barley land as there is around, but rather 'n put it into hay or corn or potatoes, they 'll climb the ridge to cut wood on

government land and sneak it down on burros. I 'm afraid you 'll have no end of trouble with them, Miss Judith, and that 's a fact."

"Miss Judith, the — the — the days of chivalry may be go-gone to the dogs, but if you say the word, I 'll take my — my — my shotgun and crawl along the bluff and pep-pep-pepper the whole crowd. I will, 'pon — 'pon my word, if it costs me my life."

"Stop your foolishness, sonny," said the father calmly. "We don't want no blood and thunder business round here. It 's an ugly thing to run up agin, but what we want is to consider this matter impassionately an' jewdiciously. If you don't mind having the firewood cleaned out of that gulch, Miss Judith" —

"But I do mind. I shall not let them carry off a single stick," she returned, with decision.

"Then you better let me go down and have a word with them. I 'll lay down the law to them."

"No. Go straight home. It 's past your dinner hour now, and your wife will be waiting. I can lay down the law to them myself. They won't dare" —

She did not finish the sentence, but with compressed lips and a little toss of her head suggested the dark fate that would overtake the malefactors, in case they should venture to resist the rights of a landed proprietor.

Yet when the rattle and rumble of the departing team had died away down the hillside, she almost regretted that she had not accepted the old man's kindly offer. Moving toward the gulch, and stand-

ing at the head of the steep trail leading down to the water, she became conscious that the dull stroke of the axe had given way to a new and even more significant sound, the sharp hiss of a saw as it gnawed its way through green timber.

A new and alarming possibility arose before her. Suppose that a tribe of squatters should be endeavoring to take possession of her land. It seemed a reckless proceeding for one small woman, unarmed, to attempt to defy a party of reckless squatters. She had been long enough upon the coast to know something of the character and methods of these people. She had read of the manner in which bands of men, some of them outlaws, and others aliens, yet contrived to defeat the rights of honest settlers. She had read of roads and trails blocked or rendered impassable, of disputes over boundary lines where lives had been taken and foul murders remained unavenged. Yet the sense of proprietorship, the stout conviction of inviolate personal right which has before now made heroes of cowards, was strong within her.

Stealing softly down the trail, she succeeded in crossing the stream. Threading the tangle of briers on the opposite bank, and passing a jutting ledge, she came suddenly upon a clearing, the centre of the operations to which she had been hearkening.

It was a relief to find only one man, a strong, athletic fellow in overalls and white sweater, who was kneeling, saw in hand, with his back to her. When she perceived his occupation, her indignation blazed out afresh.

Upon a rude ground sill, laid of rough hewn young alders, he was actually laying the floor of a house. He sprang to his feet as she succeeded in making her voice heard above the scream of the saw. In spite of the tumult of wrath that surged within her, she could not but appreciate his deferential manner.

"Madam! How can I serve you?"

He spoke with formal courtesy, removing his hat as he addressed her. In dismay she observed that, instead of the rough boor or ignorant Mexican she had expected to deal with, this was a gentleman; and, although he spoke politely, it was very plain that he regarded her presence as a most distasteful intrusion.

Over Miss Judith swept a quick conviction that she would have to muster all her resources to face and rout this foe.

"You are on my land," she said distinctly and coldly. "I am sorry that I must tell you to leave. I came to notify you. I cannot permit this to go on," waving her hand in the direction of the incomplete floor and the small pile of lumber near by.

"Unless I am sadly misinformed, this is a quarter section of government land that was not surveyed or filed upon up to three o'clock yesterday, and that has not a sign of a habitation upon it," returned the stranger, quite as firmly and decisively.

"My house is on the opposite side of the stream."

The stranger stared at her in unfeigned astonishment.

"I came over the ground yesterday with my

lumber. We unloaded it at the head of the trail. I camped there last night. I can swear there was not a stick of timber other than my own, or a human being, within a mile of here at that time."

"Nevertheless, my house is there. The roof has just been fastened on. You can go and see for yourself," retorted the lady triumphantly.

"Madam, are you sure you are not dreaming, or have n't you lost your bearings? Houses are not built in a day."

"Mine is not a board house. It is a patent house," returned the lady, with dignity.

"A patent — I beg pardon?"

"A patent house. Made of paper pulp or something of the kind, compressed. It comes in sections, all ready to set up."

"I am not sure that such a structure comes within the requirements of the law," remarked the interloper gravely. Then, remembering his duty as a host, albeit his right to act as such was under challenge, he motioned in the direction of the pile of lumber.

"Please be seated. Let us discuss this matter fairly and dispassionately, Madam — Miss" —

"Judith. Miss Judith."

"Hang it! A very Gorgon of a name. Goes well with her errand and speech!" was his secret comment, as he bent forward and tried to catch a glimpse of the face the little shaker so effectually concealed. Aloud he said: —

"And my name 's Paul."

She acknowledged the introduction with a stiff

little bow. Mr. Paul deliberated in silence for some moments. The woman took advantage of the opportunity to look about her. The smouldering embers of a camp-fire, surrounded by a few rude cooking utensils, showed where her rival claimant had prepared his noon meal. A pair of gay Navajo blankets were airing on some bushes, and near at hand a couple of packing cases had been hastily opened, and a portion of their contents, consisting of a miscellaneous assortment of clothing, tools, and various personal belongings, were scattered about on the ground. A larger case, standing a little apart, also had its cover lifted, but its contents were apparently undisturbed, except that spread over the top and hanging down over one side was a piece of black drapery, so dense and heavy that it at once attracted and held the woman's attention. She shivered as she looked at it.

"What a singular thing to bring to a mountain camp!" she reflected. "It looks like a funeral pall."

Her meditations were interrupted by Mr. Paul.

"At what time, may I ask, did you commence building operations?"

"I came up with Mr. Birdsall and his son. They were very prompt. We started from the valley at daybreak — let me see — at twenty minutes to six this morning."

"The very hour that I began carrying my lumber down the trail."

"And he began to set up my house at precisely eight o'clock," continued the lady.

"The deuce!" said Mr. Paul, this time expressing himself aloud. "I beg your pardon, but that does complicate matters. I 'm a punctual sort of fellow myself when I have work on hand. It was exactly eight when I hung my watch on that tree," nodding in the direction of a sycamore sapling behind her, "got out my axe and hammer and saw, and began."

"But I had three of the lines run by a surveyor — unofficial, of course, — week before last," retaliated Miss Judith, with a little nod that struck Mr. Paul as being extremely saucy and disagreeable.

"I 'm ahead of you there. I struck the spot when I was traveling through the hills two years ago. The friend who was with me was a civil engineer. He ran all four of the section lines, and I helped him. We even christened this little stream Escondido, or Hidden Creek."

"If running the lines gives one any legal advantage, which I very much doubt," retorted the lady, shamelessly abandoning her own attitude of the previous moment, "I am sure that must have been outlawed long ago. Anyhow, you have n't a shadow of a squatter's right until your house is up, and mine is ready for occupancy. I shall have Mr. Birdsall take me to the station to-morrow, and I shall take the evening train and go straight to the Land Office in Los Angeles, and ask them to make an official survey of the land, that I may file upon it."

"And I shall get this shanty in some sort of shape to-morrow night, if I have to work all night, and leave off doors and windows, and roof it with blankets. Then — I know a trail that leads across the

range. I have the fleetest pony in the district," pointing to a spirited sorrel grazing near by, whose splendid chest, neat hoofs and stocky legs bore witness to his broncho blood. "I shall go directly to the county seat and file my application for a survey."

"I shall contest it," asserted the woman, with such fire and decision that the rival claimant gave her another curious look. But the ugly shaker kept its own counsel.

"And waste all your substance in litigation. I warn you that I am an obstinate fellow, and never give up a just cause."

The idea of this unceremonious scramble to establish their rights evidently did not appeal to either of these enterprising settlers. After a long pause, during which the man scrawled cabalistic figures on his lumber, and the lady strung some belated alfilaria blossoms on a blade of grass, he broke the silence.

"What does your family consist of, Miss Judith? I infer that you are its head."

"There is no one but myself," replied the lady, in a low tone.

"Then listen to me, Miss Judith. I — really I very much dislike to enter a contest with a lady. Could n't we settle on some amicable basis? Let me offer a suggestion. Three miles below here, in the heart of the fertile valley, there is a strip of land forty feet wide and half a mile long, about three acres in all, which by some odd blunder was omitted from the original survey. My friend, the surveyor, told me about it. It runs along the edge of one of the most valuable ranches in the valley, and

the owner would have entered it long ago, but he is already the proprietor of a tract that bars his right to acquire government land in this State, and he has conscientious scruples against making a dummy entry. As a matter of fact, no one has any title to it, and you could homestead it to-morrow. Small as the strip is, it is in a region where high values rule, and is already worth ten times as much as this will be in our lifetime. One of these days the settlement about it will become a village, and you will be the lucky possessor of town lots. Moreover, it is — excuse me for saying so — in a much more desirable and suitable neighborhood for a lady to live. Your present location is, if you will permit me to say so, a very lonely and isolated one for a lady."

"Thank you, Mr. Paul. I am afraid of nothing."

"And it is very unprotected."

"But I have a most efficient protector."

"The land I have been telling you about is in a pleasant neighborhood," persisted the man, his voice betraying his vexation, "convenient to town and market, and with a church close by."

"Why don't you take it yourself?"

"I — oh, I prefer the hills."

"So do I."

The young man drew out his pocketknife and carved his pencil in silent wrath. He had an uncomfortable conviction that the face in the shaker was laughing at him. But his resources were by no means exhausted.

"Then let me tell you of another place. Five miles from here, but also in the hills, there is a

quarter section of surveyed land, better than this, of which I also learned through my friend the surveyor. It was entered by an old man nearly seven years ago. He died after living there three or four years, and after awhile his children abandoned the claim without proving up. In six weeks the claim will have lapsed, and be open to entry without contest. For the present, according to custom, it stands in his name on the government maps. Only a few are aware of the state of the title, or it would have been snapped up long ago. It is directly on a good traveled road, has a few orchard trees well started, some twenty acres are cleared, and there is a valuable water right. It is really a rare chance."

"You are perfectly free to take advantage of it," replied the lady coldly.

"But I prefer this."

"So do I."

"The deuce!"

This time the lady laughed aloud — a clear, musical laugh that blended with the ripple of the brook below. He was so plainly exasperated that she instantly grew grave again.

"Then there is nothing to do but to await the survey. For the present we may as well declare a truce, I suppose," he said with resignation.

"I suppose so," returned Miss Judith reluctantly. "Of course I have the prior claim. But one of us may die, or decide to go away. Of course I shall not go away," she added quickly, evidently fearing that her antagonist might imagine she was making some concession.

"But you may die," he suggested.

"That is — inhuman!"

This accusation discomfited the enemy. He hastened to defend himself. "But it was your own suggestion. What am I to infer, then? That the mortality may be on my side?"

"You need infer nothing; I was only generalizing. It is often extremely indelicate to particularize."

For one swift instant the shaker was lifted, and a pair of flashing gray eyes blazed at him. The next instant the slight figure had taken an unceremonious leave.

He took up a handful of nails and eyed them reflectively, then seized his hammer and addressed himself to work. For a few moments the stroke of his hammer kept time with her fleeing footsteps; but the sorrel horse lifted his head and whinnied as she plunged down into the thick underbrush.

His master had evidently lost his zest for his task, for, after laying a single strip of flooring, he sat down upon it and gravely considered the singular complications in which he found himself involved.

"It might be worse," he decided. "If she were an old woman, infirm or feeble, I would have to lay down my arms and surrender without quarter. Or if she were a young matron with a houseful of children, she might have routed me. Happily the case is altogether different. I 'll venture she 's a peppery little schoolmarm of uncertain age, who has for some reason temporarily abandoned her profession to seek a sentimental retreat amid mountain solitudes uncontaminated by the tread of man. Or

she 's a new woman, adopting misanthropy as a novel and interesting fad. In either case she 'll soon get disenchanted, or be ready to listen to a reasonable proposition for a compromise. 'Afraid of nothing!' Hang her independence!"

His meditations were disturbed by an appalling sound, — the cry of a woman in mortal peril.

With the instinct of a mountaineer, he caught up his rifle, which was leaning against the bole of a live-oak, and, guided by this piercing cry, ran swiftly down the path to the brook, leaped the shallow stream, and sprang up the steep trail leading to the mesa above. The tall trees on either side interlocked their branches overhead, and the dense, leafy canopy through which only an occasional ray of sunlight found its way, produced a perpetual twilight.

Near the head of the trail, he saw the slight figure of his visitor. Half fainting with terror, not daring either to advance or retreat, she was clinging to the bough of a friendly oak, her eyes fixed upon an object further along the path.

Mr. Paul gained her side, and, to his horror, saw in the dim light the huge, tawny shape of a California lion, its sinewy form poised uncertainly, as if it were doubtful whether to spring upon its prey or to beat a cowardly retreat, its great head outstretched and dully regarding the lady, the long tail vigorously lashing the weeds that lined the trail.

Quickly and stealthily the man raised his rifle to his shoulder and was bringing his eye to bear upon the sights, when a small hand gripped his arm and a soft voice implored him, —

"Don't kill him! Oh, please don't kill him!"

So extraordinary and unexpected was this request that Mr. Paul committed a most unsportsmanlike act. With the ferocious beast but a couple of rods away, and liable to spring the next instant, he paused with his finger on the trigger, and took his eye from the sights to turn it upon his rival claimant.

"I beg you not to kill him. Could n't you try him with a piece of meat?"

Several queer thoughts pursued each other through the young man's brain at this remarkable proposal to bait a mountain lion. He was convinced that either he or the lady had gone daft. On the whole, he was inclined to accredit this unhappy infirmity to himself, for the rapidity with which he was obliged to revise his previous conceptions of her was in itself bewildering. The shaker had fallen off, and in her terror Miss Judith had forgotten that he was her enemy, forgotten her own threats and pledges of heroic resistance to his pretensions, and was clinging to his arm with her pleading face uplifted.

Instead of the vinegary spinster of withered aspect and uncertain years whom he had imagined hidden away beneath the disfiguring bonnet, he saw a woman, young and beautiful. The sunlight had tangled itself in the brown hair, banded about the small head like a coronet and escaping in soft tendrils over her white forehead. Her mouth was wistful as a child's, her skin the texture of the rose leaf, and the large beseeching eyes that she lifted to him were gentle and moist as spring violets.

CHAPTER III

A FRIEND IN NEED

THE young man's common sense asserted itself and recalled him to a realization of their danger.

"My dear child," he cried, taking an odd delight in this paternal form of address. "A mountain lion is not a beast to be trifled with. Let me fire."

"A mountain lion! Oh, dear! A mountain lion? He 's mine!"

The girl burst into a little irrepressible laugh.

Never was a sportsman in such an embarrassing position. Mr. Paul lowered his weapon in desperation, still keeping a vigilant eye on the animal, which lashed its long tail more vigorously than ever.

"Miss Judith, will you be kind enough to tell me if you 're the keeper of a menagerie?"

"It is my dog. My big mastiff, Hercules. Warranted dangerous and guaranteed to defend me against all intruders. But I 'm horribly afraid of him. Mr. Birdsall tied him up for me. He has somehow broken loose."

It was Mr. Paul's turn to laugh, and the hills reechoed his boisterous merriment, while the mastiff wagged his tail with renewed energy.

"Don't touch him! He 'll bite. The man who

sold him to me in San Francisco assured me he had nearly killed several men."

But the young man already had his hand on the dog's head, and the mastiff, instead of resenting this familiarity, seemed gratified, and was rubbing against his knee and smelling of his pockets.

"I don't see how you dare," said the girl, aghast at this foolhardiness. "I know I shall never dare touch him."

"Oh, dogs always like me. And you're a good fellow, aren't you, Hercules? I believe he's not at all bloodthirsty, but honestly hungry, Miss Judith. I'm afraid you don't feed your mountain lions well."

He felt in his pocket and brought forth a small sandwich, wrapped in a paper bag. The dog devoured this greedily, after which Mr. Paul inserted his hand beneath the animal's leather collar and led him up the trail. The girl followed, in a brown study.

"So this is the house?"

She nodded, but did not venture to invite his opinion, as he critically regarded the exterior. Attached to a stout staple in a tree beside the cabin, was a bright steel chain. The young man examined it and held up a broken snap on the end.

"You can't hold this great fellow with any such flimsy fastening. A rope is the proper thing for him. A good, strong rope, something as near a cable as you can find. Ah, here is a piece that will do for the present."

From amid the rubbish, neatly tucked away in a

packing case, he drew a short piece of half-inch manila and secured one end to the animal's collar, and the other to the staple in the tree.

"I think this will answer," he said, examining the knot, then letting the rope fall from his hand. "When you want to let him go, you need only to untie the rope from his collar and leave it hanging here."

"But I shall never dare untie him," replied the girl despondently.

"Then what possible protection can the animal be? Any ill-disposed person could easily storm your castle from the other side. Indeed, it would n't take much of an athlete to pick it up and carry it off."

"I am not half as much afraid of ill-disposed persons as I am of my dog," confessed the girl reluctantly.

"Now, I 'll tell you what I 'll do," proposed the young man. "Of course it 's perfectly absurd for you to have this dog chained up here all the time, so that he cannot be of the least use to you. If you like, I 'll come up here every night and let him loose, and then every morning, as soon as I get up, I 'll come around and tie him up again. In that way you can feel perfectly easy at night, for I really think the animal is capable of taking care of any stray traveler. And in the daytime you will be able to go about without the slightest fear of the dog."

The girl made a faint protest that this would be altogether too much trouble for Mr. Paul; that she

could not think of taxing him in this way; but her neighbor, who seemed to be a very amiable young fellow when clashing land titles were not in question, assured her that he would not mind it in the least; that he had always been in the habit of taking a walk night and morning, and that it would be no hardship whatever to direct his steps in this direction. So the strange compact was sealed, and Mr. Paul took his departure, to resume operations upon the domicile which was to support his adverse claim when the land should be surveyed and placed upon the market.

CHAPTER IV

A WARRANT THAT WAS NOT SWORN

To one who has always lived in a crowded community, where all nature has been mutilated by the hand of man, there is a rare delight in awakening, day after day, to the grace, tranquillity, and beauty of nature fresh from the hand of its Creator. Miss Judith, who had all her life breathed the murky air of the city, whose small feet had ever trodden damp or dusty pavements, and whose eyes had been bounded by walls of brick or stone, with only an occasional escape to a sea-beach swarming with people, or a great artificial park laid out by rod and rule, and with forbidding signs on every grass-plot and flower border, had now entered upon a charmed existence.

She was sitting out under her oaks, engaged in some light needlework, the next morning, enjoying the bright sunshine and the twitter of birds, unconsciously absorbing the beautiful picture spread out below her, when the clatter of hoofs and rattle of wheels resounded on the road below, and the good-natured ranchman who had aided in placing her household Lares and Penates in position appeared in a light cart. He looked relieved upon seeing her alive and whole, but addressed her with a very apologetic air.

"I got into hot water, I can tell you, Miss Judith, going off an' leaving you the way I did yesterday," he began, mopping his forehead with a red handkerchief. "Mis' Birdsall, she just would n't let me hear the last of it. Talked all the rest the day an' all night about it. Said the idee of leaving you up here all alone, with a lot o' strange men trying to jump the land, for all I knew! Set it all down to me an' Orlando being men-folks, an' slaves to our stummicks. Said we thought more of our mutton an' pertaters than we did of human life. She 's a warm-hearted woman, Mis' Birdsall is, a pow'ful warm-hearted woman, an' she let me have it hot an' heavy. I 'll own I was a mite oneasy 'bout yeh, an' I thought I 'd come up an' see how you got along with that greaser crowd. Mis' Birdsall 'lowed likely as not I 'd find yeh murdered in your bed. Did they cut up rough, now?"

"There was only one," quoth Miss Judith, busying herself with the drapery she was hemming, while a faint flush rose to her cheek.

"I swan! That ain't like the race. They gen'ally go in swarms."

"I think he 's not a — not the class of men you supposed, Mr. Birdsall," explained Miss Judith demurely. "In fact, he talks very fair English. He seems to be an American."

"Tarnation! They 're the wust kind!" exclaimed the old man, forgetting that he was condemning his own race and kith and kin. "A greaser makes a big to-do, an' you 'd think he 'd make war on you an' all your relations; but you can gen'ally handle

him some fashion, if you talk smooth an' don't seem to mind his bluster. A Yurrupean can most always be bought off, if wust comes to wust. But you get an American or an Englishman in a snarl over a land title, an' they 'll law an' law till they get gray-headed. How 'd he talk? Anyways reasonable, now?"

"No. He was very unreasonable," declared Miss Judith, with decision. "He said he was on the land two years ago, and prefers it to any other place he has ever seen, when he *knows* there are much better tracts in this very country, open to entry. Oh, he is certainly the most unreasonable person I ever saw."

"People don't gen'ally reason much when prop'ty rights is concerned," sagely observed the old man.

"And hard-hearted! He even intimated it was possible I might die before the land was surveyed, and so remove all obstacles from his path," she said bitterly.

"The villain!" exclaimed the old man, openly alarmed. "Why, child, your life ain't safe a moment with a man round that talks that-a-way. He — he might be up to anything, — pisen your water! run off your stock!"

"Oh, I guess not," said the girl. "You see, we have the very same water; and as for stock, I have n't any, except my hen and her chickens," nodding in the direction of a fussy little mother-hen who was diligently scratching up the sod before the cabin, in a commendable effort to find sustenance for her fluffy brood, although corn and wheat were scattered all around her.

"Well, you come right hum with me, anyhow," insisted the old man. "Mis' Birdsall, she 'll make you stay there till this man 's out of the way. I 'll swear out a warrant agin him this very afternoon."

"I really am not a particle afraid of him," said the girl.

"Ain't you, now?" asked the old man, admiringly. "I says to Mis' Birdsall last night, when she was carryin'-on so 'bout yeh, I says, 'Now you look heah, Mis' Birdsall, Miss Judith 's a mite of a creetur, but I 'll guarantee she 's a young woman that can take care of herself.' But when it comes to actually talking 'bout yeh a-dying off — I nevah reckoned on that. The cold-blooded ruffyan! I 'll swear out a warrant agin him!"

"Oh, no, I would n't, if I were you," protested the young lady. "He really does n't look exactly murderous. In fact, I believe — I am almost sure — I was the first one to suggest that one of us might die or go away, and so settle the case."

"Well, that ain't so bad, for a fact!" The old man was appeased, but there was a twinkle in his eye. "Maybe he 's the one that needs to keep a sharp lookout, after all."

"Mr. Birdsall!" The small person rebuked him with great dignity.

"Oh, no offense, no offense, Miss Judith. I 'm not sayin' that you 'd pisen his water or run off his stock, but a woman can plague the very life out of a man, if she 's a mind to, without doing anything to transgress the law, or so much as fracture the least little rule of eticat."

This time there was a look of humorous understanding in the eyes of both, as the girl looked up for one brief instant.

That night the old man conveyed to his wife the impression he received in that instant, saying, "Don't you worry any more about Miss Judith. Save your pity for that forlorn young man that's come up here a stranger. If she don't make it hot for him before that entry question 's settled, I don't know when the very mischief 's in a woman's eye; an' bein' married this thirty year I ought to" — But here a stern "You, Samuel!" that he had learned to understand and respect during his quarter century and more of married life, cut short his comments.

"Now, 'bout that bringing of the water down that we was talking of yesterday," resumed the old man, after having fully absorbed and assimilated this expressive glance of the lady's; "I 'd like to do it for yeh, best kind, but if I 'm ever to summer-fallow that east field of mine, now 's the time. An' that boy Orlando 's plumb crazy to do it for yeh. I don't know what 's got into the boy. He warn't so stuck on any job of work before, but he seems to set his heart on doin' this. Do you want to sluice or pipe it?"

"I 'm afraid I don't know what a sluice is," admitted the young lady.

"Only some boards tight-jinted, to carry the water down. They 're cheaper an' easier to lay than pipe, an' they don't clog or require a dam."

"Then I 'll have the sluice," said Miss Judith.

"I'll have the boards j'inted together at the mill, an' Orlando can bring them up with the big team. It's a plain, straight-ahead job. Only finding a rest for the sluice, an' gettin' your level by the water flowing along it. Are you a mind to trust him with it?"

"Why, certainly," replied the young woman indifferently. "It does n't matter in the least who does the work. All I want is the water."

Miss Judith spoke with little knowledge. It would matter very much who did this particular job, as she was some day to discover.

"The main thing is to get a good fall. He 'd better go a thousand feet back, to make sure. He 'll have to dig an' pick away the rock a little to get round a couple o' pints above here, but I reckon he 'll make out. It 's all down-grade. No siphoning. By the way, what you goin' to do for milk up here?"

"I really had n't thought. Of course, there 's condensed milk. I opened a can this morning for my coffee; but I can't say I relish it."

"Good, fresh milk, an' plenty of it, is what you want to bring the roses to them bleached city cheeks," said the ranchman. "It 's too far away to go or send, for the sake of a quart or two a day. You 've got plenty of feed up here. Why don't you keep a cow?"

CHAPTER V

MISS JUDITH'S INVESTMENT

"I DON'T know the least thing about one. I have n't the faintest idea how to milk."

The old man laughed indulgently. "A baby can learn. Orlando 'll teach you. Then you 'll have plenty good, fresh milk, an' butter. I ain't got any stock to spare, but what put it into my head, my neighbor Montrose, he spoke to me about it as I was passing his place this morning."

"And what did he say?" eagerly inquired Miss Judith. The more she thought of it, the idea of keeping a cow appealed to her. Hanging on her wall was an engraving of which she was very fond, and which represented a group of cattle and a pretty young milkmaid. It would be delightful to have one of the lovely, deer-like creatures always grazing under her oaks.

"He ast me," said Birdsall, "if the young woman as had taken up this claim in the hills did n't want a cow? Said he had a nice two-year-old heifer he wanted to sell, — one he had raised himself. I promised him I 'd speak to you."

"I wish you 'd ask him the price, and send word by Orlando."

"Now, see here, Miss Judith. 'T ain't my place to advise, an' I ain't the man to run down my neigh-

bors. But don't you buy no cow unless you examine her yourself, an' find out all her p'ints. Don't you miss one thing. You ask when she was fresh, an' how much milk she gives, an' about the cream, an' whether she 'll stand good to be milked, an' milks easy, an' if she kicks the pail, an' what stock she comes of, an' if she 's sound an' healthy. Don't you overlook a single p'int. You 're bound to get taken in some way. Everybody mostly is that buys a cow. Mind, I ain't making no reflection on Ed Montrose, but the man ain't living who 's got a cow to sell, an' 'll represent the facts just as they is, without a mite of coloring. I tell you, a minister of the gospel can't be trusted to tell the truth about a cow."

"Then I 'll go down and see her."

"That 's sensible. You take a look at her yourself, an' see what you think of her. I 'd take you down in my buggy, but I can't bring you back today. It 'd be a clean two-mile walk up here again."

"Why, I 'll be glad to go, Mr. Birdsall. The walk will only be a bit of pleasant exercise. I 'll be ready in five minutes."

The old man put it down to Miss Judith's credit that she was ready, properly cloaked and hatted, within the promised time. Indeed, she looked so very dainty and pretty in her stylish check walking-suit and broad-brimmed chip hat and feather, that he secretly wished he had put on his Sunday suit that morning, and endeavored to spruce up surreptitiously by drawing a pocket-comb through his beard, under pretense of stroking it.

The road led through pleasant windings and easy descents to the broad county road below. The Montrose house was a large, square structure, discreetly retired from the road behind a tall evergreen hedge, trimmed into rigid sugar cones. Mr. Montrose, a dapper little middle-class Englishman, in corduroy knee-breeches and shooting-coat, came up from the stable as he saw them enter the gate. The old man assisted the lady to alight, spoke the necessary words of introduction, and assuring Miss Judith that "Mis' Birdsall was coming up to see her as soon as she was settled," excused himself and drove away. He evidently did not intend to have any part in the proposed cattle deal.

"I understand you have a cow to sell, Mr. Montrose," said Miss Judith.

"I believe I did mention to Mr. Bihdsall that I had a nice little heifeh I might dispose of."

Mr. Montrose spoke very deliberately, in a soft, low voice, and with a slight drawl. Indeed, his voice was so very soft and low at times that Miss Judith had difficulty in understanding him.

"Can I see the heifer?" she asked.

"Cehtainly. If you 'll kindly wait 'eah one moment, I 'll have one of my men bwing 'er up."

The lady waited some time, declining the invitation tendered by Mrs. Montrose, who was very large and stout, to take a seat in the house. But she accepted from that lady's hands a glass of sweet, creamy milk, cool and refreshing after her dusty ride.

At length Mr. Montrose returned, flushed with exertion, and leading the heifer himself.

Miss Judith scrutinized the animal sharply, letting no detail escape her. It was bright red in color, with white markings on either side of its face, which gave it a fantastic expression. It looked plump and well fed, and had a somewhat overgrown look.

"How much milk does she give?"

"I would n't be positive," returned the gentleman; "but I fancy she gives from six to eight quahts a day. Mrs. Montrose, have you eveh measured Sawah Ann's milk?"

"No, Ed," replied Mrs. Montrose. "It 's always brought in with Kitty's, and they 're poured in the pans together. But she gives enough for the lady's use. She 's a young thing, you see, Miss Judith, and not come to her full milking yet."

"Is she pure Jersey?" Miss Judith persevered, while Mrs. Montrose returned to her household cares.

The Englishman contemptuously snipped off the heads of a row of weeds with a little stick he carried.

"My deah madam! No Jehsey for me! She 's a cross between Devonshiah and Du'am. The vewy finest stwain in the country. Jehsey can't compah with it."

"Is she an easy milker?"

"Perfectly easy, madam."

"And she 's gentle?"

"Gentle as a dog, Miss Judith. I always make it a point to bring up my stock by hand. It makes them almost 'uman. They know me better than their own mothers."

"She looks kind," said the girl, putting out her

hand in response to what seemed to her a beseeching look in the heifer's eye, but quickly withdrawing it as a misgiving seized her.

"Does she bite?"

"Nevah, madam!" Mr. Montrose had his attention distracted at this moment by a noise in his stable-yard, and turned his head to investigate it. When he faced Miss Judith again, he was sober as a judge.

"Madam, I assuah you, I would n't keep a cow on my place that would bite. There is n't one in my 'erd that I would n't guahantee not to bite."

This sounded very honest and promising. The young lady stroked the heifer's nose. The animal licked her hand, and she conceived an affection for it on the spot. She tried to recall the remainder of Mr. Birdsall's cautions.

"She has nice, clean, long limbs," she remarked. "She looks as if she could run fast."

"Yes, ma'am. She comes of the best racing-stock in the country."

"And her back has such pretty lines."

"People who know what 's what in cattle," said Mr. Montrose, dropping his voice to a mysterious whisper, "always look for that nice arched back, when they 're after a fine milch cow."

This settled it for Miss Judith. She had not only been reassured on all the points the old ranchman had cautioned her about, but she had discovered other admirable features which he had not so much as named. There was nothing to do but to ask the price. The sum the Englishman named

seemed even to her inexperience somewhat excessive.

"If you 'll just figgah it up this way," said the Englishman, softly, "I don't think you 'll consideh it at all exhorbitant. Fihst, you get you' milk, say seven quahts a day, two hundred and ten quahts a month. At eight cents a quaht that 's sixteen dollahs and eighty cents. Then you' butteh, say two rolls a week; choice table butteh 's six bits a roll. That 's six dollahs. Twenty-two dollahs and eighty cents a month. Neahly three hundred dollahs a year. Miss Judith, if I asked you a hundwed dollahs for that heifeh, you 'd still be making more than two hundwed peh cent. a year on your investment after deducting the cost of foddeh."

This was such a very moderate and rational way of looking at the matter that the lady felt quite ashamed of having for one instant caviled at the price of so great a treasure. She paid the price on the spot, with a mild apology, and arranged to have Orlando bring the heifer when he should come up to work on the sluice the following week.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER SIEGE

One evening, a few days later, Miss Judith, sitting on the threshold of her cottage, looked away from the book she was reading to see the sun setting in a glory of pellucid rose and crimson, transfiguring the distant valley, robing the mountains in splendor, and reflecting its dazzling light in the western sea. Wrapped in her thoughts, she did not at first observe that the scene had another spectator. Under a tree some rods distant a man stood, apparently absorbing the picture.

When he saw that he was observed, he came directly to her.

"You must admit that I have chosen the best location for my dwelling," she said. "You have not the sunshine, the freedom, the broad and beautiful view of the uplands."

"I did not come here for views," said Mr. Paul, with sarcastic emphasis. "I came here for a wholly different purpose than sitting down and enjoying the landscape."

Miss Judith put the young man down in her mental inventory as wholly lacking in sentiment and ideality.

"And that purpose is?"

"Farming, naturally. I have the seclusion of the

cañon, the music of the stream. Besides, the land in there is infinitely superior to this. You could n't raise onions and cabbages here to save your life."

"Oh! Onions and cabbages!" returned the girl scornfully.

"Cabbages and onions are more profitable than charming views, and oak-trees, and wild flowers. You are plainly no farmer, Miss Judith."

She resented this imputation with asperity.

"There are farmers, and farmers. One can always choose. I am going to raise strawberries, and raspberries, and blackberries."

The young man groaned in spirit. His theory that the young woman's invasion of the primeval hills was due to some passing whim fell to the ground.

"You 'll break your back over the one, and scratch your hands to pieces with the other," he retorted. "And as for blackberries, only stroll up the banks of my stream in early June, and I 'll show you wild berries that in flavor will discount any cultivated fruit ever offered in the market. My friend the surveyor and I nearly lived on them when we were up here two years ago."

"Your stream!" she repeated, with a little satirical emphasis upon the possessive pronoun. "It is upon your stream that I shall rely to irrigate my berries. A man is coming to pipe the water down next week."

"Oh, as to that, there is abundance of water for both our uses," he returned indifferently. "Can I be of any further assistance to you this evening, Miss Judith?" he added pleasantly.

"Thank you. I think not. But I am forgetting my province as hostess, sir. Won't you come into my house?"

"I don't know about compromising my rights by entering the abode of mine enemy," he said whimsically, but he obediently followed as she led the way into the cottage.

It was impossible not to marvel over the magical little home that a woman's ingenuity and taste had created in one short day. There were but two rooms, the sleeping apartment being divided from the living-room by dull rose curtains, toning with the pale terra-cotta of the walls. Each side of the larger apartment was fitted with a square, projecting window. Grayish-blue denim curtains, figured with white dragons, were looped back above these, and the broad window-seats were converted into couches, with Japanese rugs and a profusion of pillows. A little bookcase, with faded rose curtains, stood beside one of these alcoves; a couple of easy-chairs and a rattan rocker were conveniently distributed, and a tiny drop-leaf table of polished mahogany stood near a small antique dresser, where a few pieces of dainty china were ranged behind glass doors. In one corner of the room a flowered screen stood guard.

"My kitchen!" explained Miss Judith, swinging the screen about and disclosing a trim little gasoline range and kitchen table and cupboard, while a small square door in the wall gave access to a wire safe attached to the wall outside.

"It is all very pretty, very comfortable, very

tasteful," commented the visitor. "It has but one drawback."

"And that is?"

"It is not a house at all. It is a toy. Only see how it shakes when I walk across the floor."

He took a few heavy steps, and the light structure rocked at each movement, to the owner's manifest trepidation.

"Oh, don't! Please don't. It is n't necessary to step so hard!" she pleaded.

"When I get my house built, Miss Judith, you can step as hard as you please on the floor. I predict that this will go over in the first high wind," he grimly added.

"In this windless climate?"

"It is not precisely in a cyclone belt. But wait until some night when the trades contrive to slip in between yonder mesa and the mountain range, and come sweeping down the coast valley. Perhaps you may be moved across the gulch, seeking a location near mine, without any effort of your own."

Again Miss Judith mentally accredited Mr. Paul with a gift for saying very disagreeable things.

Aloud she remarked: —

"I perceive you are an optimist."

Mr. Paul disclaimed this caustic little compliment.

"No. Only a philosopher, after a lame and halting fashion. It is always well to face the inevitable, and to prepare for emergencies. When I go on a journey, I take an accident insurance ticket. Under such circumstances as these I would counsel you"—

He broke off, lifting his eyes to inspect the roof of the slight structure, and evidently taking the measure of its resistance.

"You would advise me — What? I am waiting."

"As we cannot tell exactly when the calamity will come, it would be better to take out a life policy. The premiums are more reasonable."

"I can dig a hole in the ground and retire into my cave when the wind begins to blow, like the residents of the Western prairies."

"But what will you live in when you come out?"

"A mere shelter is easy to devise. Wiser than I have lived — in a tub!"

Mr. Paul held out his hand, smiling.

"Good-night," he said.

There was a hint of hesitation in the girl's manner. Then a small hand fluttered into his waiting palm, the shy eyes were upraised to his with an impulse of friendliness, and the voice that echoed his farewell took on a tone of neighborly kindliness.

Before she retired to her couch that night, Miss Judith tried the experiment of crossing the floor of her dwelling with a heavy stride, as Mr. Paul had done. She even stamped on the floor; but the little cottage stood as firmly as a rock. Satisfied with this crucial test, she retired to rest, wondering why Mr. Paul would persist in making such needless and absurd predictions.

Notwithstanding the courteous attitude which they assumed toward each other, each of these young people was firm in the resolve to defeat the

purpose of the rival claimant. As the man slowly walked home that night, he pondered the situation.

"Of course, it 's perfectly absurd for a woman to undertake to be a farmer," he reflected, "and it 's really nothing but an act of kindness to help her out of her mistake as soon as possible. Amateur farming is a disease, and it has to run its course. No amount of well-meant advice will ever check it. The rational mode of treatment is on the homœopathic plan. I 'll take her up an armful of those pretty illustrated catalogues the Eastern seed-houses are perpetually sending out. And I 'll see if I can't find some old numbers of a Poultry Journal and the Live-Stock Breeder. It 's better for her to have the whole thing at once. When a man or woman takes it by degrees, tries vegetables this year and fodder plants the next, and berries and flowers and orchard trees, and rare plants from the Orient, one after another, the malady keeps up, and sometimes strikes in in a chronic form, and lasts for a lifetime. If I don't mistake this Miss Judith's temperament, she 's the type that will take the whole thing at once, in a healthful form, and be exempt from it forever afterwards."

Miss Judith's reflections were none the less vigorous and to the point; and, although her plan of action might not have been quite so well systematized as Mr. Paul's, it was no less clear in her own mind.

Her dreams were troubled that night. She thought that she was out at sea in a boat, and that a storm burst upon her. The waves dashed mountain high, and her frail craft tossed helplessly about under full

canvas. Other boats passed by, but they would not heed her pleading cries. On the deck of one staunch little sloop she discerned Mr. Paul standing, and she cried out to him to lay by; but he only smiled mockingly, and lowered a net over the side of his boat, and held it in his hands, and she understood that when the wind and waves should have done their work, he meant to recover her body. After a long delay, her recreant crew came up from the hold where they had been hiding, and lazily began to reef the sails, to a great creaking of ropes, clanking of iron, and rattling of blocks and cables. The vessel pitched less violently, and gradually calmed down, and rode the sea like a bird. But the strange clamor continued, rising to a deafening din, that aroused her from her deep sleep.

She sat up, and looked around her for the familiar belongings of the little cottage. The gray light of dawn was in her room, and a cool blast shrieked through a shutter which was open above her head. The deafening roar of artillery sounded around her, occasionally varied by a shrill whirring and jangling, and a scraping against her outer walls. The fierce bay of the mastiff, apparently rising from the bowels of the earth, proved that something strange and unusual was going on. Had some invading army passed the populous valley, to lay siege to her tiny dwelling?

She made a hasty toilet, thrust her feet into a pair of small knit slippers, and essayed to make her way to the door. This was a difficult feat, for the floor was tilted from its proper level, and the wind

appeared to come from all points of the compass through her open casements. She found it necessary to pursue a roundabout course, steadying herself by grasping various articles firmly affixed to the wall.

Her eyes were still dazed with sleep, but she was dimly aware of a peculiar disorder in the room. Only the locked doors of her dresser prevented the china, which had all slid to the front of the shelves, from falling to the floor. Under her feet were the fragments of a glass jar she had left on the table the night before, holding a branch of wild roses. As she at last succeeded in gaining the opposite side of the room, the frail structure gave one final lunge. Again she heard the thunderous din outside, but with this final reel and bump, as if first tossed on the crest of a wave and then plunged in the trough of the sea, the building appeared to come to a stand. With trembling fingers the girl slid back the bolt and opened the door.

It would not have surprised Miss Judith in the least to have found a wild waste of blue waters foaming and churning about her. It did surprise her very much to find her doorway completely obstructed with a leafy barricade. She felt like the maiden in the fairy tale, about whose abode the enchanted forest springs up in a single night. While she stood, uncertain and bewildered, she was startled by seeing a man's face through the screen of foliage, and a voice anxiously called her name.

"Miss Judith!"

"Yes," she answered faintly. For the moment it

was grateful to feel the nearness of a human being, albeit that person was her enemy.

"Are you alive?"

To this very superfluous question Miss Judith returned a scornful response.

"Of course I am."

Mr. Paul seemed short of breath, like one who has been undertaking some herculean exertion. Rank suspicion rose in the lady's mind.

"Mr. Paul, what have you been doing to my house?"

"Merely staying it in place, that it may ride out the gale," responded that gentleman coolly, although she could see that he was mopping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"But how dare you close up my door in this way?" demanded his small antagonist, viewing him with wrathful intent. She followed the challenge with a faint cry of terror, as the floor again rose beneath her feet, so that she only saved herself from falling by catching hold of the door, which swung back on its hinges.

"Just wait till I take an extra turn of the wire around that end," exclaimed Mr. Paul, and to her surprise he disappeared skyward, and she heard light touches along her roof, followed by a renewed jangling and clamor, in the midst of which the small dwelling seemed to gradually right itself.

Feeling herself once more on a firm foundation, Miss Judith brought all her pigmy strength to move aside a great bough which was thrust across her entrance. To her surprise it proved unyielding. Fail-

ing in her attempt to remove this obstacle, she parted the lighter branches with her hands and peered through them. In a direct line with her eyes, and not half a dozen feet away, was a large nest, clumsily built of twigs, from which four little bald heads with yawning mouths were stretched.

The girl rubbed her eyes in mystification.

Again the legend of the forest occurred to her. Or had she, herself, been in some enchanted sleep? How else could great living boughs interlace before her door, and birds build their nest and rear their young within them? From the greedy little mouths her gaze traveled downwards, and she could scarce repress a scream of horror at seeing the ground some twenty feet below her.

She was not slow to grasp what had actually occurred. The high wind, rising almost to a tempest at daybreak, taking advantage of the broad eaves of the tiny habitation and surging through her open casements, had lifted the light structure as if it had been a box kite, and carried it into the great oak-tree that stood near by, where it had been wedged fast among the branches.

Her neighbor again made his appearance, this time beside the open window. She saw now that he carried a coil of wire on his arm, and a hatchet in his hand.

"The wind was so high that I really felt uneasy about you," he explained apologetically. "It occurred to me that it would n't be a bad plan to wire the house down to the ground, as they do in tropical countries where they build more solid structures, but where hurricanes abound. I reached here just two

minutes too late. You moved a little earlier than I anticipated, Miss Judith. But permit me to congratulate you on your safe transit."

"I suppose I ought to be very thankful to you," remarked the lady, comprehending the service that he had rendered, and awarding him a doubtful gratitude.

"Oh, not at all. There 's no occasion whatever!" declared her neighbor, deprecating her gratitude. "As I understand the law, every improvement made on my land, and not covered by special contract, belongs to me. If I had n't reached here just in time, you see you might have moved over on the next section."

"This is preposterous," exclaimed the lady, her spirit returning. "If this were true, then it would simply mean that you are adding to my possessions with your building up the gulch."

Mr. Paul paid no attention to this feminine outburst, but went on as calmly and steadily as he could in the teeth of the gale: —

"You see, you put up this house without making any contract whatever with me, and that makes it my legal property. In securing it against further pilgrimages, I am merely looking out for my own interests. Fortunately, in making your ascent you chose a side of the oak where the large branches parted sufficiently to give almost free passage, and the lighter twigs snapped off or were pushed aside. I see there is a bit of the cornice missing, however, and the roof is somewhat battered, but a bit of cardboard and a pot of paste will make that all right."

Miss Judith was plainly offended at this light assessment of damages her domicile had suffered, as well as at the insidious reflection upon its light structure.

"I shall have Mr. Birdsall up to make what repairs are necessary, as well as to put it in its proper place again," she said stiffly.

"I trust you don't think of having it taken down," Mr. Paul exclaimed, genuinely disapproving and disappointed. "By nailing a step here and there, you can have the most delightful winding staircase, finished with a step or two at the bottom. And you must excuse me for suggesting, Miss Judith, that while the little dwelling was — well, not exactly a conspicuous feature of the landscape down on the broad mesa, in its new location up in the clouds it is really quite a stately mansion. You can live here, secure from tramps and four-footed marauders, like a — like a" —

"Like a bird in a tree!" completing his simile with a curl of her little scarlet lip. "Thank you, sir, for your very poetical suggestion, but I happen to be a very practical person, and the idea is not at all to my taste."

The young man accepted this withering rebuke in good part, and retired from the scene.

When farmer Birdsall heard of the strange flight undertaken by the paper cottage, he hastened to the scene and listened gravely to the little lady's instructions, but deliberately reconnoitred the situation from every possible point of view before opening his mouth to reply.

"Now, Miss Judith," he protested, "you take my advice, and don't you fly in the face of Providence, which it has lodged your paper house in the very identical place best fitted to it. Great Scott, if it does n't look for all the world like a nice, trim pigeon-cote up thar, with all the latest improvements!"

"Mr. Birdsall, I am the best judge of where I want my house," replied the lady, with much dignity. "I prefer to live on the ground, like other people."

"But, child, how you goin' to get it down from thar? The' ain't enough jackscrews in the valley to mount under it, an' when you get up to it, how 's a man going to get it apart, or find a place to stand while he 's lowering it? If I could rig a scaffolding up in the clouds, now, it would be an easy matter."

"The house must come down," said the girl firmly.

"Oh, well, if you 're set on it, I s'pose it must," conceded the old man. "Of course the oak 'll have to come down with it."

"But I want the oak just where it is. It 's my very largest and finest oak. I would n't part with it for the world!"

"But it can't be done without hacking it into slivers. Don't ye see that when the wind hefted you up an' toted you thar, only them big branches that make the crown of the tree kept you from sailing for kingdom come? You brought up agin them, an' then the whole concern must have fluttered there, trying to get away, an' skewed around till it settled

cornerwise: this near part over here wedged in between the main trunk an' that big limb; an' the far corner ground itself in like it was mortised in the crotch back there; an' that man Paul has wired it good an' fast. Come round this side an' see for yourself. You can't unhook one of them roof sections no way without lopping off all the top branches; an' you can't get the sides apart or off the floor till you 've cut off the trunk at that p'int, an' the moment you 've done that, the whole house 's loose, an' liable to smash down before you can stop it."

"But it 's so ridiculous to take up one's residence in a tree!" cried the little woman, who could have wept from vexation at discovering that she would be compelled to accept Mr. Paul's advice.

"Don't you fret about that!" said the good old farmer, in a sorry effort at consolation. "It might be for a big man, or even for a full-sized woman, but for a little body like you, with no family, an' a paper house, it 's a grand idee! I see this end here is a leetle out o' plumb, an' you just let me get my spirit-level an' put a sycamore limb across them two branches, an' make you a front doorstep an' a bit of a railing about it, an' I 'll have you all shipshape in less 'n two hours."

CHAPTER VII

A WILLFUL WOMAN

After a two days' blow the wind abated, and was succeeded by a sky so serene and an atmosphere so reposeful as to efface all recollection of the weather's unseemly prank. A few days later Miss Judith, who began to feel quite at home in her little eyrie, was summoned to her door, to find the lank Orlando gazing in admiration upon her lofty residence.

"Beats Ja-Ja-Jack's Beanstalk all hollow now, Miss Judith. Found the ogre up there?"

"No, Orlando. My ogres are down on the earth."

The boy's attention was drawn to the meshwork of stout wire with which Mr. Paul had secured the dwelling to the ground and tree.

"Wha-what 's that? Bur-bur-burglar trap?"

"The very latest patent, Orlando."

"Got a bell on the end of each one?"

"That is n't necessary. The wire itself sounds a loud enough alarm. Try it."

The lad complied, and the loud whirr of the wire made good her assurance. His face beamed.

"You 'll have him slick, if he comes prowling round here at night."

The young lady began to understand the trend of

the youth's inquiries. To her shame be it said, she permitted Orlando to believe that the wires were designed to entrap the man who had so considerately placed them there. Orlando had a fresh inspiration.

"Miss Judith, I 'll te-tell you what! I got a b-b-bear-trap to home. I 'll fetch it up and put it by the tree. If he ge-gets that far, it 'll cat-catch him by the leg."

"I think this will be sufficient, Orlando. But I 'll remember the bear-trap, in case I need it. Is that the sluice you have in the wagon?"

"Yes, ma'am. Part of it. And I g-got a sp-spade and a p-pick, — weapons of warfare, Miss Judith. I 'll do him up. Strat-strat-egy is better than powder and shot, you know."

The lady was at a loss to interpret the look of owlish wisdom that accompanied this pledge, but set it down to the youth's highly imaginative temperament, and the novel he had taken with his breakfast that morning. Her attention was at this moment distracted from him by an imperative low from behind the great wagon, and the sight of a couple of long horns and a streaked white face looking mournfully around the hind wheel.

"She 's a great one, is Sairy Ann!" testified Orlando. "Could n't come half fast enough up the moun-mountain to suit her. She 's been ducking under and bump-bumping into the wagon all the way. Wh-where 'll you have her staked?"

"What do you think would be the best place?"

"There 's nothing for her to eat up here. That

fo-foxtail 's no good for cows. There 's mi-mighty good feeding on the fl-flat, below the house."

The young lady resigned the pastoral possibilities of a heifer on her lawn the more readily as she became convinced, on a second inspection, that Sairy Ann was not as picturesque as the cattle in her picture. It was a decided advantage to her, in her new rôle as a dairymaid, to have this country boy on hand to initiate her into the mysteries of milking, setting cream, skimming, and churning. She found it to be an even greater advantage, as the days went on, to have the aid of Orlando's long legs to pursue the enterprising Sairy Ann, who was constantly seeking green fields and pastures new, and who soon displayed a very restless disposition and great skill in untying her picket rope, developing prowess as a sprinter, and leading the youth many a weary chase up the hillside or down the cañon.

Meantime the cabin across the gulch, taking form more slowly and solidly than the paper house, was finally completed. Miss Judith, who only beheld it from afar, finding constant excuse to decline the owner's pressing invitation to take a nearer view, could not but acknowledge its picturesque simplicity. Laid of rough-hewn logs, with a generous adobe chimney swelling out, bell-shape, at one end, and with a broad porch finished with a rustic balcony woven of rich-hued manzanita shrubs from the surrounding hills, it had a singularly substantial and home-like aspect, as of a dwelling long since erected, and grown into complete harmony with its surroundings.

Mr. Paul was certainly very obliging in these days. He overwhelmed the lady with lovely pictorial catalogues of all the seed-houses and nurseries on the American continent, tempting and delusive little periodicals, which set forth the virtues and superiorities of all manner of vegetables and fruits and flowers in the most alluring guise, and bewitched the little woman into sending order upon order, until her bank account stood dangerously near zero, and she realized that she had undertaken gardening on a scale which would have kept a dozen pairs of hands busily employed. Nor were her ventures confined to the plant world alone. She invested in a coop of guinea fowl, which disturbed her rest at daylight with their discordant cries; and she imported a trio of snow-white turkeys, whose plumage proved so shining a mark by night for the coyotes that a solitary hen-turkey was soon the sole survivor of the once happy family, wandering through chaparral and gulches like a forlorn spirit, or patiently sitting on nests of eggs in the greaser grass, coming off gaunt and mournful, without the comfort of a solitary chick. The man who prompted all these enterprises was a heartless spectator of their results.

Mr. Paul and Miss Judith, while outwardly civil and even considerate in their treatment of each other, had abated no whit of their original purpose. Each looked forward with pleasurable anticipation to the ultimate eviction of the enemy, and the exclusive possession of the disputed tract. In the mind of the man there may have been an unconscious

reservation, which, when his title should be absolute, would have moved him to concede a moderate acreage to the lady, should her bucolic zeal really survive the test of time and experience, and she turn to him as an humble supplicant for mercy.

The lady herself was like granite in her purpose.

"He shall not have a single acre nor a fraction of an acre," was her grim determination. "No matter how nice he tries to be, nothing can alter the fact that he came up here and persisted in building his house when my cottage was already up and I was living in it. And he had fair warning that he was on my land!"

Meanwhile, strive as she might to be independent of her neighbor and absolutely free from any obligations to him, he was perpetually rendering assistance with which she could ill dispense. Through special contract with the Birdsalls, father and son, her provisions and mail were brought up regularly twice a week from the town in the valley; but when Mr. Paul rode by on his sorrel mare, courteously asking if he might do any errands on her behalf, her sugar was sure to be out, or baking powder, yeast, soap, or some equally indispensable adjunct of civilized existence had run short, and before she could check herself, the want would be on her lips, or to be plainly read in her face.

When tasks or chores too heavy for her own strength needed to be performed, Mr. Paul always seemed either to anticipate the need, or to present his services at the opportune moment.

Miss Judith may or may not have been by nature

vindictive, but there is nothing so arouses the spirit of mischief in a woman as to have a man steadfastly persist in unasked and undesired attentions, which nevertheless could ill be spared by the recipient. The lady repaid him with every malicious little prank, every neglectful and inconsiderate act, that her fertile brain could devise.

Most vexatious was this relation of helpless dependence when accident brought it to the knowledge of the outer world.

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed old farmer Birdsall, bringing a load of pumpkins up to the cottage one day, and coming upon a truly pastoral scene.

A row of freshly dug holes in the loamy earth back of the cottage indicated the destination of some raspberry vines, whose scraggy branches were bravely beginning to leave out from a trench where they had lately been "heeled in."

At the end of the row Miss Judith stood, one gloved hand holding upright the tip of a thorny stalk, while Mr. Paul industriously shoveled earth about its roots.

The girl was manifestly embarrassed by the arrival of the visitor. Not so the young man, who greeted the old farmer in the most cordial way.

"Just in the nick of time with our planting, are we not?" he asked, indicating a gray bank gathering in the southeast.

"Nothing but fog. 'T is n't time for a southeaster this season o' year," corrected the man of experience indulgently. "By Jumbo! So you 've made up friends, an' settled your diffunces. Now I says to

my wife, I says, 'There 's that man *an'* that woman, up that gulch, each of 'em alone to theirselves, an' no one can tell when they 'll need a good neighbor, pow'ful bad,' I says. 'An' if, insted o' jawin' an' scrappin', they 'd just look at things sensible-like, an' settle up their diffunces,' I says, 'they 'd both be showing long heads an' live together in neighborly peace.'"

"But we 're not neighbors. Mr. Paul 's my tenant," interposed Miss Judith quickly.

"You don't mean to say you can get any rent for that little patch o' land up there, half a mile from any road. No pasture, no grain land, no nothing!"

"I am sorry to contradict the lady," put in Mr. Paul gravely, "but the fact is, Miss Judith 's my tenant. Her rent is in arrears, and this is the only way I have of getting even with her. No, Miss Judith, I would n't stamp the earth down with my foot. This is the better way, if you will permit me!" he added seriously, firming the earth around the roots of the plant with the pressure of his palms.

Occasionally Mr. Paul's sufferings were along the lines of strictly poetic justice. The guinea-fowl took a fancy to change their roosting-place to the trees bordering the stream close by his cabin, and awakened him in turn with their unearthly clamor at daybreak. The white turkey's favorite foraging-ground was upon his newly planted beet patch; while Sairy Ann, escaping from her tether, invariably chose her race-course through his garden and around his abode; and although on such occasions Mr. Paul would bring back the truant himself, lead-

ing her by her rope to her assigned pasture-ground, Miss Judith received the prodigal without a word of regret or apology for the damage she had wrought.

On the other hand, Mr. Paul's sorrel mare had a naughty habit of sometimes straying beyond bounds, and on more than one occasion, after a hard day's toil, he passed Miss Judith's abode, halter in hand, pursuing an imaginary track leading into the next cañon or down into the valley, only to return at dusk,, after a fruitless search, to find the animal quietly grazing under the oaks. At such times he had a shrewd suspicion that the animal had been in the near vicinity of Miss Judith's dwelling all the time, and that the lady of the mansion might have spared him weary hours of unproductive exertion, had she chosen.

Orlando's job at Miss Judith's, which she had expected to have finished in a few days at most, extended itself to weeks. When she expressed impatience at the long delay in bringing water so short a distance, he puckered up his mouth wisely.

"Better make a good, sol-solid job, Miss Judith, — a good, solid job while we 're about it!"

His parents, suspecting that the unconscionable time the boy expended up the gulch was being squandered upon trapping birds or in studying the habits of the wild things about him, with a zeal for natural history which had been strictly discountenanced by his wise elders, communicated these misgivings to Miss Judith. She thereupon made several trips to the scene of Orlando's labors, to ascertain what progress he was making, but invariably found the

youth working like a savage, shoveling earth or picking rock. It occurred to her, one of these times, that he was making very elaborate preparations for the laying of a small box sluice.

"Is it the custom, Orlando, to dig a ditch as big and deep as this, to lay a sluice in?" she once asked.

"Nothing like making a good, sol-solid job while we 're about it, Miss Judith," he repeated. "Them 's my sentiments. This here sluice is come to stay. It ain't going to be washed away by the first st-storm; and if it sl-slops over, there 'll be something to catch the water, and keep it from mud-mud-muddying up the whole country."

As his work finally neared completion, she emphatically objected to carrying ditch and sluice past her cottage.

"All I want is water for the house, and to irrigate my berry patch back of it," she explained.

"That 's all r-r-right, ma'am. You only need to pull this pl-plug, and you 've got the water where you need it. But what 'll you do when you ain't using it? It 'll be sp-spilling all over your yard, making it all nasty and sog-soggy. You just let it run down hill in the pas-pasture, and you can have as pretty an al-al-alfalfa field as there is in the valley."

Miss Judith appreciated the wisdom of Orlando's plans the day when the water was first turned into the sluice. It overflowed the latter and filled the ditch from bank to bank, a boiling torrent, discharging itself in a stream like a waterspout down

the hillside, hydraulicking a miniature lake in the meadow below in the course of a few minutes. She followed the course of this waterfall, and saw a ghastly head, crowned by a pair of long horns, lifted above the surface of the pond. Orlando flew to Sairy Ann's rescue. With a few energetic strokes of his shovel he diverted the water, distributing the main current into a number of harmless minor streams, which trickled peacefully over the arid land.

"Good thing she 's got such long legs, Miss Judith!" he cried. "Sairy Ann was n't born to be drowned. My land! Would n't she make a spr-sprinter, now?"

"I suppose it 's a great advantage to a cow," replied the lady doubtfully; "but I can't see the exact value of such a possession to the owner."

"Sid-Sid-Sidney Smith says, Miss Judith, that true economy is the ap-application of waste forces. Now, there are Sairy Ann's legs going all to waste. It just ri-riles me to think of it."

Orlando pondered the subject of Sairy Ann's phenomenal legs to some purpose. In the end he constructed a treadmill attachment to Miss Judith's rotary churn, placed Sairy Ann in the mill, and travelers through the wilds of the Vernal Hills were thereafter treated to the unwonted sight of a long-legged red cow placidly chewing her cud, and churning her own cream into butter.

The afternoon that Orlando completed his triumph of hydraulic engineering, and turned the water into ditch and sluice, Mr. Paul rode up to the cottage

and hailed the youth, who had gathered up his tools and was on the point of departure.

"I want to know under whose instructions you have been acting in making this ditch?" demanded the young man. "Is this an original idea of yours, or are you acting under directions?"

Miss Judith saved the startled and stammering boy the embarrassment of replying, appearing promptly at the cottage door.

"He has been acting solely under my instructions and directions, Mr. Paul," she answered, lifting her small head proudly.

Instead of addressing her with his usual gentle courtesy, Mr. Paul was formal and severe.

"Then the water here was taken from the stream by your direction and at your instance, Miss Judith?" he said coldly.

"Certainly!" answered the girl, even more icily, indignant at his tone and demand.

"What am I to understand, then?"

"Understand! Understand that I assert my right to the water. That I am going to have the very nicest berries next summer that have ever been grown in the Vernal Hills!"

Mr. Paul was very pale, and was evidently exercising severe self-restraint. Twice he opened his lips to speak, but resolutely closed them. At length, lifting his hat, he rode down in the direction of the valley.

After this episode, which Miss Judith pondered with growing resentment and perplexity, a very perceptible change entered into Mr. Paul's behavior.

She was no longer annoyed by his solicitous attentions. Although he still occasionally offered some slight service, these offers were made in a perfunctory way, and he did not appear in the least surprised when they were declined. They soon fell into a habit of merely bowing very distantly when they met, and these meetings were as seldom as Miss Judith could make them, for she took great pains to retreat into her castle whenever she saw her surly neighbor approaching.

The rains came early that season, and when a carpet of verdure began to cover all the hills and valleys, when the streams went leaping madly down the gulches, swollen with winter floods, and the few deciduous trees along their margin, shaking themselves free from the dying leaves that still clung to their branches, began to timidly put forth new buds and tassels, it was observable that Mr. Paul's manner toward his little neighbor relaxed. But Miss Judith, vaguely wounded and resenting his unaccountable behavior, received these overtures coldly, and gave him no encouragement to attempt to pass the invisible barrier which had somehow grown up between them.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ARMISTICE

With two healthy and, on the whole, normal young people, such a state of affairs could not forever continue, and this sense of bitter hostility, whatever its source, dissolved in a gust of childish merriment on Christmas Day.

It was a day of memories to both, a day that it required strength and courage to calmly face. Miss Judith had risen at daybreak that morning, and gone energetically about her tasks, shutting out all thought of past or future. She had cared for her cow and chickens, swept and dusted her house, and set about some unusually elaborate preparations for her solitary afternoon meal. And then, in the midst of a pastry baking, she had suddenly gone to a little cabinet that hung on her wall, and had taken out a photograph, looking long and sadly at the handsome boyish face, bowing over it, in a tempest of tears, crying wildly: —

"Oh, Rob, Rob! My dear, dear boy! Where are you to-day? I am so lonely, so lonely, Rob, without you!"

Having regained her composure, trying to escape from herself and her sorrows, her thoughts had turned to her lonely neighbor up the gulch, and, although she would, without compunction, have

robbed him of land and property, her woman's heart was overwhelmed with pity as she reflected that, being a man, he could by no possibility be able to prepare himself a decent Christmas dinner!

With Miss Judith, to think was to act. She hastened back to her kitchen, renewed her labors with new zeal, lit all the burners of the gasoline range, and soon through doors and windows floated savory vapors, appealing to hungry nostrils.

It was but a little past noon when the girl set out on her mission of charity. She had, with feminine inconsistency, gowned herself daintily for the occasion, having donned a pale gray cambric, finished with fine needlework at collar and wrists, and wearing smoked-pearl ornaments; and with her gray chip hat tied down over her ears, and a covered basket on her arm, she looked like some sedate little shepherdess. An expression of conscious rectitude was on her face, the light of her generous purpose shone in her eyes.

Halfway down the trail she met Mr. Paul. One of his arms clasped a mass of manzanita branches laden with clustered scarlet berries, the Christmas holly of California. In the other hand he carried a platter, and on it was a smoking haunch of venison.

"I could not be so selfish as to enjoy these alone," he began.

"Nor I!" she chimed, holding up her basket.

Both laughed.

"Now that you are so far on the way, come to my cabin," he urged.

"No. Let us go back to my cottage."

"Miss Judith, suppose we compromise and take our Christmas dinner in the open," proposed the young man. "I know a delightful spot, not a stone's throw away."

Nothing loath, she followed him along a narrow path through the underbrush, to where a tiny bench lay like a shelf on the steep bluff, making room for a giant live-oak. A great boulder beneath its shade offered a solid if somewhat uneven table.

"We will lunch in the old Roman style. Here is my divan!" cried Mr. Paul, throwing himself down on the sod beneath, green as emerald.

She seated herself more cautiously, furtively examining the ground for ants and spiders, and selecting for herself a hollow in the roots of the tree.

Mr. Paul had placed the venison on top of the big rock, and he now threw the bright berries around her, embowering her in green and scarlet.

"You look like a veritable wood-nymph," he said lightly. "All in gray and green. When you have finished eating, I shall expect you to knock on the trunk of the oak and disappear, like the hamadryads of old."

"Instead of which, belonging to this very prosaic age, I shall go home and wash my dishes," she replied. "But first let us dispose of their contents."

Out of her basket came a roast chicken, nicely browned, with a little flask of warm gravy; Boston brown bread and butter; crisp lettuce, dressed with mayonnaise; cream puffs; a mould of jelly; a tiny plum-pudding, and a couple of mince turnovers.

Mr. Paul watched these revelations with a greedy eye.

"The first civilized food I have seen in six months!" he averred.

"See that you do justice to it!" returned the girl, secretly pluming herself on her discernment. "And this is my first game for a twelvemonth."

"Here is an ideal carver."

He drew from its sheath a horn-handled hunting-knife with a flashing blade, politely tendering the use of his pocket-knife to her.

They ate slowly and luxuriously, with keen appetites whetted by the fresh outdoor air and the exertions of the day. Sometimes they chatted pleasantly together. More often they gazed silently down into the pretty nook where the stream rippled below, or out over the distant valley with its farms and villages fronting the dazzling, restless sea.

"Why did you come up here?" she asked him once, impetuously.

"I had a purse of gold," he answered dreamily. "From my earliest recollection, I possessed it. Although I spent freely of it, it never was empty. It brought me friends, popularity, comfort, occupation. I thought it never could be exhausted. But one day I drew from it my last coin. The purse itself vanished. I came up here to repent my folly."

She heard him gravely and thoughtfully.

"And you?" he at length said.

"I had no purse. If I had owned one, I would not have cared for it. But I had a beautiful gem. I was told that if I would keep it untarnished, I

would one day be crowned a queen, with this stone for the chief of my crown jewels. One day I lost it. I am always seeking it, but I can never find it."

Her voice had sunk into a tone of indescribable pathos. He reached over and gently placed upon her bare head the chaplet of manzanita berries that he had been weaving.

"You shall still be crowned," he said. "These are better than jewels."

Old memories again had possession of her. She did not raise her eyes lest he should see the tears that had gathered there. Had she encountered his gaze in that moment, she might have seen a look that comes into a man's face but once in a lifetime.

The sun was dropping low in the west and the shadows growing long. She sprang to her feet, dropping the chaplet. Again she was the matter-of-fact little woman of the paper cottage.

"It is growing late. The mists are rising, and my chickens will be clamoring for their supper," she said, beginning to clear away the remnants of the feast. The young man joined her.

"'A banquet-hall deserted!'" he quoted, looking back under the oak, as they walked away. "But how pleasant it has been!"

"It has been dreadfully unconventional," murmured the girl shyly.

"I have found that the dearest pleasures in the world, and the purest and most innocent, are apt to be unconventional," returned the young man earnestly.

He accompanied her back to the mesa, declining her invitation to tarry there.

"For this one perfect day, I am tempted to forgive you all of my injuries," he said, lingering there.

"Your injuries! If any one has been the injured party, I am sure it is I," declared Miss Judith, drawing up her slight figure and darting an indignant glance at him.

"Never mind! Some day I shall wipe out all old scores in one master stroke of retribution. Until then, I grant you absolution."

Firm in the conviction of the justice of her cause and the integrity of her every act, Miss Judith reviewed this parting charge of Mr. Paul's, and at each rehearsal of this interview gathered fresh resentment. Failing to account for this extraordinary accusation coming so suddenly in the wake of so pleasant an afternoon, she set him down as a man of moods, whose disposition nobody could rely upon. Being an exceedingly well-balanced young woman herself, she decided Mr. Paul's vagaries to be inexcusable.

CHAPTER IX

THE BLACK CURTAIN

In the valley, dark rumors of a mysterious nature were being circulated concerning Mr. Paul.

The time has gone by when a hermit could dwell tranquilly in his cave, wrapt in reverie and undisturbed by the intrusion of vulgar curiosity. No matter how resolutely a man in these days attempts to separate himself from the world, society will seek him out, going about the errand with all the more avidity because of the interest aroused by any eccentric variation from the common human type. Mr. Paul, who would have held himself aloof from his fellows, who made no acquaintances and was manifestly lacking in the first gregarian instinct, found that, unless he wished to set up a reputation as a veritable monster, he must open his doors to certain travelers, and extend a sincere hospitality to unbidden guests.

It is an honored custom of the California mountains to freely welcome to the meanest cabin every man journeying through the wilderness, a custom handed down from the much despised and grievously misjudged native Californians of Mexican ancestry, among whom the poorest and lowliest exhibit kindly hearts and an unreckoning generosity which puts to shame the calculating Gringo.

Throughout the mountain regions of southern California, any man who is "on the trail" may enter a cabin, even in the owner's absence, possess himself of bed and blankets, and help himself from whatever stores the abode contains. If he be able and considerate, he will leave a supply of sugar, coffee, tobacco, or ammunition to compensate for what he has taken; but the more common practice is to trust to chance to return such hospitality in kind.

Mr. Paul's house, being directly on the line of a trail leading to a favorite pass over the sierra, offered a convenient camping-ground for men coming up from the valley who wished to make an early start up the ascent the next morning. Sportsmen, cattlemen, ranchers, miners, came constantly to his door. In stormy weather, it was a common experience for him to be awakened at midnight by the entrance of some mountaineer who had compassed the passage of the range in rain or snow, who would silently stir up the dying embers in the fireplace, throw on a stick of wood, and, without a word, wrapping his blankets around him, stretch himself out on the hearth like a tired dog, to sleep off his fatigue.

Little by little, strange stories related by these wayfarers began to find circulation in the valley, which had never understood Mr. Paul, and, not understanding him, had all along sternly disapproved of the young man and his ways.

Mrs. Birdsall, coming up, armed with her knitting, to spend the afternoon with Miss Judith, first brought tidings of these weird tales.

"Now, what do you think, Miss Judith! They say he has a big curtain, black as night, stretched across the hull end of his big room."

"I should certainly say that he had questionable taste," replied the girl smiling.

"Taste! But you ought to hear the way the men all carry on 'bout the fancy fixin's he has round! Carpets hanging on the wall, with the floor all bare, if you 'll believe me! Plates with pictures on 'em stuck up on nails, an' more flummeries and gimcracks, from what they say, than Mis' Montrose has in her parlor, an' she tuk a whole course in decorating art, she did! Taste! He 's got loads of it, — hammered brass things, an' china, an' sech!"

"Oh!" commented Miss Judith, much edified.

"There 's no question about his havin' taste, an' to spare," persevered Mrs. Birdsall. "But why he should string up that great curtain, black as night, is what gets me. Nobody 's ever seen him go behind it, an' when some of 'em made bold enough to ask him what it 's for, he just lets on like he does n't hear 'em."

"Perhaps he hangs his clothes behind it, or keeps his books there, or uses it for a little storeroom, or something," suggested the girl.

"Humph! Clothes-press ten feet across an' fifteen feet long! Pretty good size for a closet, ain't it! Abe Workman got the measure by pacing off the floor inside, an' measurin' the outside of the timbers when Mr. Paul was n't round. Abe, he let on to go behind it an' see for himself what was there, he did, that same time. But he 'clared to goodness, Abe

did, — an' he 's a truthful man an' no coward, — that the minute he touched his hand to the curtain something came over him like a 'lectric shock, an' he just had to drop it."

Miss Judith was suddenly reminded of the piece of heavy black cloth she had seen hanging from the packing-case on the occasion of her first and only visit to her neighbor's chosen home-site. She recalled the strange creeping sensation she had experienced on seeing it. Even now, sitting in the bright, wholesome sunlight, a shudder stole over her at the recollection.

"Not a door or window is there in all that end o' the cabin!" insisted Mrs. Birdsall impressively. "And that black curtain hanging from the ceiling to the floor. Do you know the only place they sell that sort o' cloth? Abe Workman worked along o' an undertaker when he was a young man, and he knows!"

There was something blood-curdling in the inference to be drawn from this statement of her visitor, but Miss Judith struggled against it.

"Perhaps he is an inventor," she said cheerfully. "And possibly he lifts the black curtain when no one is there to see or disturb him. He may be at work on some instrument or machine he keeps behind it. Perhaps it is some electrical device that carries a charged atmosphere about it, and the black curtain may be a sort of shield, a non-conductor, to keep its influence from extending further."

The visitor gave a contemptuous sniff at this proposed explanation.

"If it 's an instrument, or a machine, as you say, it 's something he does n't want people to see. Mark my words, Miss Judith, that black curtain means no good!"

"Why, I shall have to go up to Mr. Paul's cabin and see this mysterious drapery for myself," said the girl laughing. "He has often invited me. And then, when he is showing me over his dwelling, which he declares much more substantial than mine, I will myself lift the black curtain and see what lies behind it."

"Don't you do no such thing, Miss Judith!" the elder woman earnestly conjured her. "You 're young, and have n't had much experunce, I dare say, an' don't know much yet, but let me tell you it 's evil things an' evil ways that hides theirselves in darkness. One o' these days we 'll hear more o' this here Mr. Paul."

"You mean" — began the girl, seriously concerned.

"Yes, my dear. I mean he may be up to doin's that 'll yet bring him to public notice," stated the old lady placidly. "Now, I 'll tell you suthin' my boy Orlando told me last night, an' made me promise I 'd never tell. Only you must n't say no word about it. The' 's a pile o' counterfeit half dollars lately been put in circ'lation in this county somewheres."

"And Mr. Paul" —

"I make no accusations, an' I don't say he 's innocent, an' I don't say he 's guilty, mind you! But one o' these days we 'll be hearing more about this

Mr. Paul, an' people far an' wide 'll hear it; an' this black curtain is goin' to be lifted some day, an' it 'll cut a figure in the story!"

Miss Judith laughed. She could not know that one day Mrs. Birdsall's prediction would be fulfilled, and that she herself would play a part in the stirring drama.

CHAPTER X

AN ALARMING DISCOVERY

HITHERTO Mr. Paul had been an embarrassment to Miss Judith, — a person whose presence upon her claim was a menace to her rights, who deserved and received her condemnation from a strictly business point of view. Yet there were times when she would very much have liked to recognize this antagonist as her friend, had such an attitude been consistent with her material interests.

The strange rumors brought to her knowledge by Mrs. Birdsall invested him with a new and uncanny interest. Previous to this she had accepted him for what he had seemed, — a frank, straightforward, though somewhat obstinate young man, whose claims were unfortunately in conflict with her own, but who was to be tolerated, and accorded a certain sympathy when the case should be decided in her favor, a result which she never for a moment questioned. Now she recalled the saying of an old heathen philosopher to the effect that the greatest secretiveness of character was invariably concealed beneath the mask of an apparently open and confiding nature, and she recalled countless incidents in support of this theory, significant reservations and more significant half admissions, all of which went to prove that Mr. Paul was a man whose past was

veiled in mystery, and who carried beneath his frank countenance some dark secret which the black curtain symbolized.

Personal thoughts and morbid forebodings dare not intrude too constantly upon the man or woman who undertakes to keep pace with the demands of California ranch life. Here nature has no period of rest, and her ceaseless activity from year's beginning to year's end exacts corresponding attention from those who would reap her bounty. With chickens hatching, strawberries blossoming, fruiting, and sending out runners every month in the year, raspberries and blackberries bearing at longer intervals, but in ever increasing quantities, and miscellaneous gardening in progress all the year round, Miss Judith had no leisure and little thought to give to Mr. Paul and his black curtain.

It cannot be said that all of these rural enterprises prospered. Flocks of brown birds contended with cutworms for her early vegetables, and other pests attacked the tender growths; for it is a painful fact, learned through sad experience by those who for the first time break virgin soil along the foot-hills of the Coast Range, that close proximity to wild primeval growth brings down upon the rancher a host of small enemies of every description, which leave devastation in their wake. It was only through unflagging industry and constant attention that a meagre crop of berries was preserved from these scourges, and Miss Judith had the pleasure of marketing, from her own ground and as the achievement of her own hands' labor,

some of the choicest fruit ever seen in the Golden State.

No Wall Street broker ever enjoyed a triumph so lofty, an exultation so great, or a pride so wholesome and so abounding, as that which comes to the man or woman who for the first time wrests from Mother Earth, by individual labor, some delicious article of food of marketable value, and who learns what it is to become enrolled as one of the producers among the human race.

The girl was too exhausted with picking and packing the berries in their square splint boxes to accompany Orlando, who carried the fruit down to the village grocer, on the occasion of his semi-weekly visit to the mesa, bringing supplies for the fair lady. She did not enjoy the full measure of her triumph until the following Saturday, when she stepped into the store, and realized the distinction she had achieved.

"Miss Judith, I just want to congratulate you on them berries!" cried the grocer, extending a horny palm.

"Is this the lady who raised those berries you had on exhibition last week, Tom?" asked a lounger, whose easy address and confident manner proclaimed him a man of local prestige. "Then I must chip in with my compliments. Madam, they beat anything that Jim Thompson ever raised. My wife says she would never buy another berry from Thompson, if she could be sure of getting these big red berries all the time."

This was praise indeed, could the lady but have

known it. Thompson was a nurseryman who supplied all the country about with small fruits in their season, and who was popularly supposed to be the highest authority in horticultural matters on the Pacific Coast.

Miss Judith acknowledged these tributes with dignity.

"Where 'd you get the variety?" pursued the last speaker.

"From a Northern seed-house and nursery. It 's entirely new, but they recommend it above everything else."

"They 're right. Let me give you one caution," said the citizen kindly. "Don't you let Jim Thompson get hold of any plants. Going to be able to ship any berries this season?"

"Oh, no," replied the girl. "I have n't undertaken raising them on any such scale."

"I advise you to hurry up, then, and get ready by another season. It 'd pay you. Shows what can be done in this climate, with good soil and plenty of water," he added, turning to the storekeeper.

"You 're right. The Vernal Hills can beat the world every time, just you give them moisture enough!" assented the latter. "How does that man named Paul — your neighbor up there — take it about the water?" he asked, turning to Miss Judith, for whom he was doing up a parcel.

"I beg your pardon?" said his customer.

"That fellow Paul! Did n't he make any kick about the water?"

"Of course not," returned the girl stiffly. "He knows I am entitled to the whole stream."

"When it comes to a question of water, in this country, it does n't seem to much matter what a person is entitled to," declared the man, with a dry smile. "More than one poor fellow in the Vernal Hills has had a bullet put through him for taking what the law entitled him to."

Beyond a sense of displeasure at having her affairs so freely discussed in the settlement, this conversation left little impression upon Miss Judith. The day came when she was destined to recall it with amazement at her own dullness.

A berry farm, judiciously conducted, is a small mint in California. Stimulated by this advice, Miss Judith, who, although seemingly possessed of very modest tastes, was nevertheless an exceedingly avaricious little woman, began to plan for the extension of her small plantation, and to lie awake nights counting her prospective profits.

All told, she had scarcely one tenth of an acre in berries, yet at the rate they were yielding, and with the increased crops which might be expected in another year, a full acre would yield a comfortable living for a family. There were not less than three acres of her strip of upland, and another acre or so in the meadow below, which might be similarly planted and irrigated. To do this would require a considerable outlay in the way of hired labor, and it would be necessary to begin at once to propagate on a large scale from the vines already brought to the point of production, thus cutting short her coming crops.

The girl had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Paul looked upon her small successes with a jealous eye. She had an even better founded suspicion that his own proudly vaunted bucolic enterprises had proved a dismal failure. Nor did she spare his feelings, for she diligently tormented him with mock solicitude, inquiring feelingly for his onions and cabbages, and slyly insinuating that the valley below was waiting with bated breath to witness the marketing of his crops. Mr. Paul turned these inquiries aside with a dignity which ill concealed his vexation, but she was wholly unprepared for the revenge she one day discovered that he had taken.

This second summer of the young lady's life in the Vernal Hills was warm and dry. The winter rains had suddenly ceased in mid-March, and were succeeded by frequent scorching winds, termed "northers" in the parlance of the district, which dried up the short herbage on the hills and caused fields of barley hay to mature before their time, so that before the month of May was well past, farmers had for the most part cut and harvested their short, succulent hay crops, and were sadly recounting their losses. The effect of two successive years of a rainfall below the average was severely felt throughout the country. Wells were everywhere drying up, streams ran low or altogether failed, and the problem of securing a sufficient water supply everywhere became the absorbing question of the hour. Men quarreled and fought over the possession of little springs. Homes were abandoned, families broken up, life-long enmities created, and the peace

of neighborhoods destroyed by wrangling over this all-engrossing subject. Expensive litigation, sapping the very life-blood of the farmer, ensued.

Miss Judith, who had all along had water and to spare, was not alarmed when the ditch in which her sluice was laid began to run low and at length became altogether dry. A gay little stream still coursed merrily along the wooden conduit, and the small galvanized tank she had at the beginning of the season placed above her cottage, connected by a pipe with a box in the sluice, was filled, yielding her an ample household supply.

In late July she observed, with some concern, that the water in the sluice was lowering. By the first of August barely half an inch flowed along the sluice, and she began to practice economy in her irrigation, watering her berries in sections, instead of treating all to a deluge in one and the same hour.

One day she saw that the water no longer flowed along the sluice below the box which filled her tank-pipe, unless she turned off the supply for the latter.

For the first time her mind awakened to suspicions that something wrong was going on up the cañon. Setting a close watch on the sluice, she discovered that twice a day, morning and evening, the water came down the conduit in a few uneven spurts. During all the remainder of the twenty-four hours not a drop flowed down.

What enemy was diverting from its appointed course the life-giving stream which had so generously nourished her pretty garden, and upon which

she had herself depended for drink and refreshment? Who was interested in making the conditions of life in these charming uplands untenable for her? Who would be directly benefited by causing her to abandon the pretty home she had established?

There was but one possible answer.

Who but Mr. Paul?

It was a dastardly act, but common report had made her too familiar with such occurrences to regard it as anything exceptional or impossible. A mile further along the hills two happy families had that season been broken up, one man laid in a dishonored grave, and another sent to the state penitentiary, as the result of a bitter wrangle over a water right. Honor, character, human feeling, common honesty, everything, seemed to go down in this frantic struggle for the possession of the precious fluid; no one expressed surprise, and the cases in which a malefactor was brought to justice, except when deeds of open violence occurred, were rare.

Miss Judith sat down to think and to decide upon her wisest course. At first she was disposed to send down to the village and begin legal proceedings against the offender, but she reflected in time that if she should consult a lawyer, one of the first questions put to her would in all probability be as to the character of her title to the land and stream. Another very uncomfortable recollection confronted her. She remembered having heard her own surveyor remark that water rights on government land were still in a very unsettled and unsatisfactory condition; that it was yet a matter of discussion as to

whether prescriptive rights did or did not apply in such cases; that, in short, nobody, not even the best lawyer on the coast, was altogether sure about the ramifications of water rights on unsurveyed or even unpatented lands.

Mr. Paul might happen to be as wise as she in regard to water laws. In fact, he might easily be a good deal wiser, for Miss Judith had only the vaguest idea of what a prescriptive right meant. Never mind! There were moral ethics away and above all the legal codes ever framed, and no right-minded person could resist an appeal to their majesty.

It was a very agitated but very resolute little person that set the paper house to rights, fastened doors and windows, descended the tree, and, with a last look at the sluice, set off up the cañon on a tour of investigation.

Miss Judith determined to make this inspection a thorough and searching one, proudly telling herself that she was not a woman to come to any hasty conclusions. She first went directly to the stream at the point where the trail crossed it, and made the significant discovery of one small pool of water, while she found that the bed of the brook, above and below this spot, was wet with recent moisture, and plainly showed that within a short time a stream of more or less magnitude had flowed along it.

Pursuing her investigations below this point, she at last made the startling discovery that not a hundred yards below Mr. Paul's cabin the brook reappeared, greatly diminished from its original propor-

tions, it is true, but rippling along as demurely as if it had never lent itself to the perpetration of wrong or injustice.

"It has plainly been diverted from its course, and returned to the stream bed at some point along here," she decided.

Upon arriving at this conclusion, she carefully retraced her steps, examining the banks closely on either side, but could find no trace of the truant stream's return except in the vicinity of a boulder which it would have taken the strength of a Titan to move, and where it seemed to her the first appearance of a flow could be detected. Reaping nothing but a pair of damp feet from this scrutiny, she regained the trail, hot, disappointed, and indignant.

"It would have been so clear a case and such unanswerable proof to have faced him with, if I could only have found the stolen water coming back to the brook, discovered the exact use he was putting it to, and followed it up to the very point where it is taken," she reasoned.

Mr. Paul's cabin had a deserted look, but she went up to it and knocked boldly upon the door. No one answered. Standing there on the picturesque little veranda, with its balustrade of rich-hued manzanita boughs, she looked down upon the young man's garden patch and noted its parched and stunted appearance; but this condition conveyed no argument to her mind.

Beyond her lay an unknown land. She had never penetrated farther up the gulch. It required some courage to gather her skirts closely about her and to

follow the trail, here narrowing to a mere thread and piercing the heart of the chaparral.

There were strange rustles in the parching grasses and tangled weeds. Squirrels, interrupted in their quest for toothsome morsels, stood upright in the brush, with tiny paws close hugging their spoil, viewing her with curious, shining eyes, then leaped down and rushed to underground nesting-places. Fledgling songbirds, untaught the dangers of familiar companionship with the human race, hovered about her, only fluttering timidly ahead when she softly put out her hand to stroke their fresh-hued plumage.

Suddenly there was a terrible commotion at her feet. A swarm of tiny brown birds, not unlike so many soberly clad canaries, slipped away in all directions. She eagerly stooped to imprison one of the pretty creatures in her hand, when a large bird, with silvery plumage and dove-like head proudly crested with nodding black plumes, tumbled to the ground in her path, dragging a broken wing.

"Oh, who could have done such a cruel thing!" cried the girl, her mind intent upon wanton sportsmen with wicked guns, as she attempted to succor the poor, maimed creature; but even as she stooped tenderly over it, it whirred swiftly through the air with unimpaired strength, alighting in a neighboring tree.

Amazed and interested, Miss Judith waited, motionless, and presently from the tree came a low, melodious call. At its repetition all the ground about her became suddenly alive with wee brown

birdlings, frantically hastening, half flying, half running, in the direction of the tree.

The mother quail's ruse had saved her young.

Scaly brown lizards, some of them rainbow-tinted, flashed through the leaves, over the rocks, and across the sand. With a tremor she remembered that a more dangerous reptile, the cruel crotalus, powerful and sinuous, with broad-fanged head, hid his dingy checked shape near the ledges of this altitude at certain seasons of the year. But she pressed on undaunted.

A little further, and she turned again into the bed of the stream, now so dry that the crusted sand broke beneath the pressure of her light foot. Here, somewhat overgrown with brambles, was the head of her sluice, and she beheld, for the first time, the really excellent manner in which Orlando had performed his task, constructing a low, but solid dam of rock, brush, and sand, below which the ditch that held the conduit broadened out in V-shape, to receive the water.

The lady examined this closely. Here were at last faint signs of moisture, probably from the morning flow. The rocks alongside wore a damp look, as if they had been recently sprinkled by the cool current flowing through the sluice. Yet, as far as her eye could command the stream above, no water was flowing.

By this time Miss Judith had evolved a very plain theory.

Instead of taking the water out of the stream precisely at the point where her sluice joined the latter,

Mr. Paul had evidently pursued a much more sensible course, and one less compromising to himself in its aspect. He had ditched or piped the flow from a point far above. This placed him in a very advantageous position, should he be called upon to defend the legality of his act. Perhaps, although he was without doubt morally responsible and well aware of the existence of the sluice, he might not be legally cognizant of it. Or — dismal thought! — he might be able to swear that he had begun to use the water above that point at some time previous to her appropriation, perhaps in that far-away period when he had first visited the land with "his friend the surveyor," — that mythical individual, whom she detested without ever having seen.

This remarkable theory was confirmed by the fact that the stream bed, which the trail now frequently crossed and recrossed, continued dry, with scarcely a trace of moisture.

As to why the young man should have occasionally turned the water into her sluice, thus still doling out to her a small supply, the girl could not determine.

Her attention was suddenly arrested by a steady "Clink! clink! clink!" coming from far up the cañon. She was growing very tired; the heat, the unaccustomed exertion, and the rugged path along which she was climbing combined to overtax her strength. This sound spurred her to fresh exertion.

Evidently the mysterious operations by which she had been deprived of her righteous property were still in active progress. Who could tell but that the

same hands that had turned the water out of its course were now building a stone aqueduct to convey it altogether out of the cañon, down into the valley, where the precious fluid was now very nearly measured by its weight in coin?

With her eyes intent on the narrow defile through which she was passing, she stumbled, slipped, and stepped into a pool of water.

CHAPTER XI

A SUBTERRANEAN VOLLEY

WATER! Abundant, flowing water, pouring over a ledge above and escaping down the hillside, a trickling stream, finding its way back into the bed of the brook and forming the pool into which she had slipped. It was queer-looking water, appearing to hold in solution a mass of yellowish clay, but cool and fresh, as she knew by the chill to which she had treated her immersed foot.

She pressed on eagerly, noting with surprise that as she progressed the water grew muddier, and was not flowing through its regular channel. The cañon contracted here, and a frowning cliff, rising in the middle distance, seemed to shut off the sunlight. Near this cliff a well-trodden path, newly made, as evidenced by the freshly cut brush lining it on either side, departed abruptly from the trail, appearing to climb a low, wooded spur, and then disappearing in the direction of the cliff, while the old trail, stony and worn, led off up a gulch which met the main cañon at right angles. The rhythmic sound of metal striking upon stone came from the direction of this new path.

A person gifted with less resources of wit than Miss Judith might have been at a loss as to which path to follow. Not so the young lady. She in-

stantly decided that it would be perfectly useless to take the old trail, which led away from what she was convinced was the scene of the enemy's operations. At the same time she did not deem it either prudent or discreet to go directly to the spot, presenting herself without warning, and without the opportunity of first ascertaining the exact state of the case. She therefore resolved to skirt the hillside at the right until she had reached the point where it merged in the cliff, and thus to reconnoitre the field before advancing upon the enemy's works.

Very noiselessly and stealthily she therefore threaded her way along the light copse growing on the stony hillside. The slope was moderate and the growth meagre, interspersed with an occasional stunted oak or clump of manzanita bushes, so that she made easy progress, and was rejoiced to see that she was steadily advancing upon the point she wished to gain.

When stones and soil were at length replaced by rugged rock, with only now and then a starveling juniper or pine taking root where a bit of soil had lodged, she found progress more difficult; but, light and sure of foot as a fawn, she persevered in her perilous journey until a bend of the hill disclosed her objective point, and she drew breath to find herself holding to a clump of purple asters on a dizzy perch, looking down over an almost perpendicular wall of rock into a little glen some forty feet below. Miss Judith had no thought to give to her own transient bodily peril. She had attained the goal toward which she had been striving.

She realized at once that she was looking down upon the bed of the little stream whose course she had been following, at a place where it emerged from a lofty gateway, of which the cliff on which she was standing formed one of the buttresses. Massive steps hewn in the solid rock, and so coated with lime that they presented the appearance of a majestic marble staircase, here formed the brook bed, and in time of winter floods must have produced a beautiful cascade; but now this staircase was almost dry, save where a mere trickle of water wound along a crevice at one side, and dripped over a fern-hung cavity below.

After leaving this dazzling white stairway, the course of the stream appeared to be completely dammed by a newly constructed deposit of clay and broken rock. This dam, beginning at a point on the opposite side of the gulch, crossed it on a slanting line, which from her point of view seemed at first to follow the bend of the cañon, but a little distance below appeared to solidly unite with the near bank. The material of which this iniquitous dam was constructed would seem to have been taken from the opposite cliff, for on top of the dam she saw a little open car, and back of this was a black hole into which she could dimly see that some sort of tramway ran.

But these things were not what most impressed Miss Judith.

Out of this black hole a stream of water was running, muddy, yellowish water like what she had seen in the stream bed. Was Mr. Paul actually piercing

this bluff to intercept and capture the water, rather than permit it to flow through its accustomed channel? How deep and shameful a conspiracy against her rights!

While Miss Judith was perfectly sure of her conclusions, she was not so certain of her premises. She wisely decided to quietly view this interesting scene, and to await developments.

She could still hear the peculiar clinking sound that had attracted her attention far down the cañon, but although it seemed to come from the black hole in the ledge across the way, and was therefore much nearer her than when she first heard it, it now sounded muffled and distant. This might possibly be due, she thought, to her own change of position and the intervention of the rocky mass below.

Save for this one mysterious sound it was now very still in the cañon. All the hills around her were barren and rocky, with occasional scraggy trees or bushes. Once she thought she saw a pair of antlers raised from a distant copse. A blue jay flew into a neighboring thorn-bush and eyed her meditatively, evidently speculating as to what new and strange manner of bird was clinging to the face of the cliff, and presently began to taunt her with his saucy cry. A tiny blue lizard crept out of a crevice in the rock beside her and came directly toward her hand. She snapped off one of the purple asters and scratched his back with its stem, while he blinked his queer little eyes at her in grateful acknowledgment.

There were voices down the cañon, and she real-

ized in vexation that travelers were coming up the trail. Nearer and nearer they drew, till she saw two figures riding horses and driving burros laden with heavy packs. She recognized the two men. The elder was an aged pioneer, who had the reputation of being the first settler across the range. The youth he had in tow was a young Englishman, dressed in picturesque cowboy style, and with a cartridge belt around his waist, trying to imagine himself a full-blown desperado on the strength of his recent acquisition of a small cattle range in the high sierras. In a year or two he would be wiser.

The old man was acquainted with Mr. Paul, having frequently camped at his cabin for the night. They stopped at the point where the path left the trail.

"Now you just wait here," she heard the old man say. "I've a friend working over here, and I want to see how he's getting on."

He dismounted slowly and laboriously, and climbed the low ridge separating them from the dam, while his companion waited in aristocratic tolerance.

"Mr. Paul! Mr. Paul! How are you?" the old man shouted, approaching the hole in the bluff.

"Coming!" sounded a full voice from its depths.

The clinking stopped, and in a few moments Mr. Paul came in sight, greeting the old man civilly.

"I only stopped a minute to see how you're getting on," explained the aged pioneer.

Miss Judith, deliberately eavesdropping, learned with helpless anger that these operations, of which she had not the slightest inkling until her own en-

terprise led her to discover them, must have been generally known and frankly discussed.

"Making fair progress, as you see," said Mr. Paul. "I took your advice and went in this side instead of the other."

"How far you in?"

"About fifty feet."

"What kind of rock?"

"A little of all kinds, I should say," waving his hand toward the dam on whose edge they were standing. "Sandstone, a little shale and clay, but for the most part this fine-grained blue rock you see all around here."

The old man, miner and prospector of '49, stooped and possessed himself of a fragment of the substance indicated.

"Limestone!" he said laconically. "Harder 'n granite. Tough work getting it out, you bet you!"

"Oh, I succeed in making about two inches a day," returned Mr. Paul, and both men laughed.

"What 's your prospects?"

"I 'm sure I have n't experience enough to judge," returned the young man, plainly a little restless over the time he was losing. "It 's slow work."

"How much water you got?" persisted the questioner.

"I have n't measured it. A matter of an inch, I fancy. But I 'm going to have it, if I go through the range for it."

"That 's right. Stick to it. Land in this country 's no good without water. Well, so long!" and

the old man departed, while Mr. Paul again disappeared into the dark hole.

Not a word about her rights, or the wicked deprivation to which she was being subjected, the injury to her property, her blighted berries and parching garden! How hard-hearted men could be when it came to matters of gain! Miss Judith clenched her hands in impotent rage.

The noise in the bowels of the bluff was resumed for a little time, and then abruptly ceased. Mr. Paul again came out, and going to a wooden box standing in a cranny of the rocks and covered with a gunny sack, took out some objects that looked like three long wax candles and a coil of heavy cord. He cut off a few feet of the latter, and, without lighting a candle, again entered the hole and disappeared from sight. Miss Judith concluded that the candle by the light of which he had been working must have gone out; but she wondered very much that he should take three at a time, and that he did not light one before entering the dark passage.

Imagine her surprise, then, while she was gazing mystified upon the scene, at seeing Mr. Paul, breathless and hatless, come running out of the black hole in the ledge, and, leaping off the dam and turning upstream, advance directly towards the ledge upon which she had so perilous a foothold.

What could be the matter? Could he have unearthed some serpents' nest in the course of his iniquitous undertaking? Was the dark hole in the ground the chosen lair of some wild beast which was about to wreak vengeance upon him, or was he flee-

ing from his own uneasy conscience, that haunting Nemesis of evil-doers, which in the case of this young man was somehow interwoven with the mystic gloom of the black curtain? What would follow?

In cold-blooded curiosity she leaned forward to see. Mr. Paul was quietly standing at the foot of the cliff on which she was perched, one arm braced against the rock. She could hear his quick, panting breath, but his attitude told only of patient waiting, while his eyes were fixed on the dark opening, from which no pursuer had yet emerged.

The next instant there came a terrific detonation, and the whole mountain-side seemed to tremble. Miss Judith, dizzy and frightened, lost her balance, and clutched wildly at the purple asters, which were uprooted in her hand.

Mr. Paul heard a frightened little cry ring out above his head, a bunch of purple asters fell at his feet, and looking up, he saw the slight figure slipping down the mountain side upon the jagged rocks below.

CHAPTER XII

MR. PAUL TO THE RESCUE

Mr. Paul took in the situation at a glance. The sandstone, presenting an almost vertical wall and offering no chance for so much as a hand-hold, made it impossible for him to reach her from below.

"Try to hold on until I can run around and get up above you and lower a rope!" he called.

She had caught the thorny branch of a mountain lilac, but the bough had bent like a willow, and was slipping from her grasp.

"I can't. There 's nothing — to hold to. I 'm coming!"

The young man sprang to catch her in his arms, but only succeeded in partially breaking the force of her fall.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously, seeing that she reeled and would have fallen had it not been for his supporting arm.

"I 'm alive!" was the curt reply.

Miss Judith released herself, stood erect for a moment, then dropped suddenly down, composing herself as comfortably as she could upon a fallen slab of sandstone. Her face was pale, but Mr. Paul's was whiter.

"Thank God you 're not killed!" he ejaculated, mopping his forehead with a white handkerchief,

whose fine texture repudiated the quality of its laundrying.

"What were you up on that ledge for?" he demanded sternly. "Don't you know that you narrowly escaped being killed, — crushed on these rocks, when you fell?"

"I — I 'd like to know what you 're doing to my mountain!" retorted the girl, trying to steady her voice, and looking very forbidding and unapproachable.

"It was a prodigious blast. That rock is like adamant. I made up my mind I 'd rip it out if the whole mountain had to go. Why did n't you let me know you were up here? How could I be expected to know any one was about?"

His reproachful tone, the absurd fact that this interloper upon her own land should presume to take her to task for having gone whither she pleased over it, made the young lady hot with resentment.

"I think it was high time I should be about," she replied with dignity. "I 'm making a tour of inspection of my property. Will you have the goodness to explain what you are doing?"

"Doing! Why, can't you see for yourself? Don't you understand? I 'm after water."

"I don't doubt it."

What scorn and rancor can be compressed into a little tinkling laugh! The man was aghast at the words and the laugh and the fierce look that accompanied them.

"I should think you might be satisfied with what you have already taken," said Miss Judith.

"Already!"

"Yes, already. My poor berries are parching and drying up in the sun below. But there seems to be no lack of water up here."

He was beginning to understand.

"And you think I have been deliberately robbing you of your water, — the water you sluiced down to your berry patch?"

She did not quite like the cold glint of his eye, nor the measured way in which he spoke. He looked dangerous. But she stood her ground sturdily.

"What else can I think, when my plants are dry, and there is so much water — so much and to spare — up here?" and she waved her hand toward the stream that gurgled out of the black hole in the rock, about which a cloud of smoke now hovered, like a wreath of mist.

"And the brook below. In what condition did you find it when you came up?" persisted her inquisitor.

"Dry. Damp, but with no water standing, though I found running water below your cabin," — laying a very noticeable stress on the word 'below.' "Of course I don't know where you have taken the water, or what you mean to do with it, but it stands to reason" —

She stopped, confused. It suddenly occurred to her that her theory of Mr. Paul's crime did not exactly conform to any course of reasoning she could at that moment devise.

"Is your sluice dry all the time? Have you had no water in it at any time since the water failed?"

"Sometimes, in the morning and at night, a little water comes down, just enough to water my chickens and give me a trifle for indoor use. It amounts to nothing for my berries. The miserable little allowance that you have permitted to flow would not be as much to them as a single swallow to a person dying of thirst."

"I'm sorry, Miss Judith, that I haven't been able to make the 'miserable little allowance' more generous. It is quite plain to me that you are not familiar with the summer habits of California streams."

"I have lived in California all my life," she retorted.

"Even that might not make you wise about the sources and caprices of these treacherous streams, which, when the surface-flow fails in a dry season, sink and disappear and appear again in the most puzzling fashion. If you had taken some pains to examine the geological formation of the brook bed as you came along, you would have found above your sluice a shale formation, which is like a sieve for holding water in the dry season."

"But the water that comes down nights and mornings?" persisted Miss Judith skeptically.

Mr. Paul would plainly have preferred not to have this point pressed.

"After a hard day's work here in my tunnel," he explained diffidently, "where I hope to develop water enough to irrigate the whole of my tillable land, including the section you are now occupying, I find that to carry a dozen buckets down to the

sluice is about all the exertion I can afford, even for the sake of my thriving berry patch."

Any feeling of gratitude arising from the discovery that she had been indebted to the personal exertions of her enemy for every drop of water she had received for a couple of weeks past was wholly offset by this insolent assumption of proprietorship over her cherished berry patch.

The lady gave an impatient gesture and turned her head aside, indicating that this foolish persistence in asserting his claim to her domain was a matter wholly beneath discussion.

"And I must add," continued Mr. Paul, "that this accusation comes with a singular grace from the lady who, without an hour's warning, last fall appropriated every drop of water in this stream, leaving my stock and myself to perish for want of water, for aught she cared."

This may seem an extravagant manner of stating the case, but those who have lived in districts where the water supply is insufficient, and who have witnessed the shocking consequences incident to its deprivation, can appreciate the tragedy of its loss. "As soon shut off a man's sunlight as his water!" is a common saying in these parts.

"Mr. Paul!"

Miss Judith faced him, her eyes ablaze, her voice trembling with indignation. "How dare you make such a statement! How can you look me in the eye, and accuse me of such an awful thing?"

"You certainly did it, and did n't hesitate to avow it then," replied the young man, confounded

by the girl's extraordinary outburst. "When I went down to see you, hoping to arrive at some compromise, — for it was a serious dilemma for me, I can assure you! — you disdained to discuss the question at all, but frankly assumed the whole responsibility of the affair. You declared your proprietorship to all the water in the stream, and vowed you were going to water your fruit with it and take the first prize on your berries at the county fair, or something of the sort. I remember the substance better than the exact verbiage."

"Do you mean to persuade me that when Orlando turned the water into my little sluice, it took all the water in that big, broad stream?" asked Miss Judith caustically.

"It takes quite a big, broad stream, flowing quietly along its bed, to fill a sluice with a capacity of some half dozen inches and with a fall of one foot in ten, to say nothing of the ditch along which it was laid," replied Mr. Paul indifferently. "But that 's all over and done with. I found a spring in a gully a quarter of a mile away, where I contrived to water my horse and obtain enough to carry me along until the rains came. I did n't mean to get caught again this season, however."

Miss Judith listened, with a knitted brow, conviction growing within her.

"That awful boy!" she said. "It must have been all planned out by Orlando."

"Oh, don't blame the boy. I did n't mean to stir up any feeling by referring to what is all gone by," said Mr. Paul pacifically.

"But it is n't gone by. It never will be gone by. You will never believe that I did n't intend to do it, that I did n't know all the water had been taken. You will never credit that until this minute I had n't the slightest idea of what you referred to that day when you rode up to the house and questioned me about my sluice."

Mr. Paul did not speak. His chill manner and attitude were so expressive that the girl was wounded to the quick.

"You did n't explain a single word," she went on desperately. "You only asked if the water had been taken from the stream by my instructions, — not 'all the water,' mind you! You never said a word about that. And I told you, truthfully, that it had, wondering very much that you should come and ask such questions, or begrudge me a small share of such a splendid flow. And then you asked what you were to understand by that, and you spoke in such a very unpleasant way that I felt quite justified in asserting my title over again to the disputed territory and all there was in it."

Again there was silence between them; and again it was broken by Miss Judith, in a sad little voice.

"You may believe what you like," she said. "I am sorry I have attempted to screen myself. If honor and truth cannot stand without the poor defense of words, one would better not lay claim to them."

She started to rise and beat a dignified retreat, but no sooner did she attempt to bear her weight upon her feet than she turned very pale, and dropped again to a sitting posture.

It was odd what keen powers of observation Mr. Paul possessed. He was listlessly leaning against the ledge, despoiling one of a bunch of purple asters of its petals, but this movement brought him instantly to Miss Judith's side.

"What is the matter? You have hurt your foot."

"It is nothing. A little twist as I slipped down. It will be better in a moment. Do they know, down in the valley, about the water?" as she remembered the inquiry that had one day been put to her in the village store, and the odd remarks that had followed.

"I think Orlando took pains that they should know," returned Mr. Paul.

"Oh, what must they think of me?"

"From what I have heard, you are generally considered a very smart woman, and I am supposed to have only met my just deserts. Sympathy is always with the woman in such a case. But about the foot. These 'little twists' are sometimes serious things. I had a trifling hurt of the kind once while climbing the Matterhorn, and paid for it with three months' helplessness. May I help you to remove the shoe?"

"I beg that you will leave me alone, Mr. Paul. It does not concern you in the least."

She sat with the skirt of her blue serge gown firmly drawn about her feet. The man could tell by the manner in which she compressed her lips, and by her alternate flushing and paling, that she was suffering severe physical pain.

"It concerns me so much that I shall not leave

you until I have learned the extent of your injury," he replied with decision.

"After doubting my word, and accusing me of so base an act, Mr. Paul, how could you expect me to accept any further service from you, — even if I were dying?"

"Doubting your word! Miss Judith, here I have been standing for the past five minutes, denouncing my own infernal stupidity in not having fully explained the water situation to you that time; at having for a moment accredited you with such vindictiveness. I 'm in sackcloth and ashes over the whole affair. Are you going to punish me further by making me responsible for the neglect of your injured foot?"

Honest contrition was in face and voice. She viewed him for a moment, her head poised on one side like a bird's, doubtful, questioning. Another twinge brought a little grimace of pain to her face, and decided her.

Meekly she put out the injured foot and attempted to undo the shoe-lacings, leaning back in sudden faintness and surrendering the task. Mr. Paul removed the coverings with a surgeon's deft and indifferent touch. If he observed the faultless lines of the little pink-tinted foot that was at length bared, he betrayed no sentiment concerning it, but manipulated the ankle with a cold-blooded interest that seemed to the suffering girl little short of savagery.

The foot hung very limp.

"Try to move it now," said Mr. Paul.

Miss Judith endeavored to obey him, but was shocked to find that she no longer seemed to have any control over joints or muscles.

Mr. Paul passed his fingers lightly along the limb, pausing at a point some two inches above the ankle joint, where an ugly ridge, marked with a sullen red swelling, was conspicuous.

He looked grave as he concluded his examination.

"I 'm afraid it 's broken," he said, easing it to the ground with exceeding care. "Just what sort of a fracture it is, or how serious, I cannot tell. You must have surgical aid. Meantime the best I can do is to apply a little water to check inflammation."

He tore some strips from a piece of soft cloth hanging at the mouth of the tunnel, and designed for the ignoble purpose of swabbing out the holes made by his drills, dipped these in the gurgling stream, and skillfully bandaged the ankle, then waited while she drew on her stocking. An attempt to put on the shoe called forth an exclamation of pain.

"I would n't draw anything tightly about it if I were you," he said. "Are you ready? Come!"

Before she could protest, he had lifted her like a child, and was carrying her down the trail, — the path that his own feet had worn, going to and from the hard toil that he had undertaken for both their sakes. She knew it now. There was no need for him to tell her that with every blow of the pick and hammer he had remembered her need, and thought

joyfully of the relief his work would bring her. Upborne in these strong arms, held closely to his breast, all pain seemed to leave the girl, and the world's burdens slipped away. Was it fancy, or did he for an instant press his dark bearded face against her hair, whispering, —

"Now that I have you a fast prisoner, my little foewoman, I am minded never to let you go!"

Like one in a happy, wordless dream, she resigned herself to his care. The western hills frowned darkly upon them, shutting out the glad rays of the setting sun which glorified the topmost peaks. Hidden creatures stirred in the copse around, and a bird, daintily sipping a crystal draught from the plashing water, soared into the air and thrilled its song of thankfulness from a tree-top.

As they approached the cabin, Miss Judith noticed that the young man's step, at first light and springing, grew heavy and lagging, and she felt the heaving of his chest as he labored along the path. A rustic chair stood on the veranda before his door, and he placed her in it. As he rose, his watch-chain became entangled in her clothing, and a small open locket, worn as a charm, tumbled into her lap.

CHAPTER XIII

MISS JUDITH FEELS THE INFLUENCE OF THE BLACK CURTAIN

Miss Judith looked down upon the locket and saw the face of a woman, a young, lovely face, with a high serenity upon it, whose eyes seemed to look into her own with a noble trustfulness.

He reached out his hand to reclaim it.

"The dearest woman in all the world!" he said with feeling. "Some day I hope you may know her."

Miss Judith did not answer. She lay back in the chair with closed eyes, trying to think, wondering what this hurt was, which went so much deeper than any mere physical pang.

"Is the ankle painful?" asked the young man.

"Yes, oh, yes."

"It has seemed rather nice to be cut off from the world, but now I wish we were united with it by a telephone wire. As it is, it will be some little time before you can have relief. Do you think you can be patient?"

"I am always patient," said Miss Judith, rebuking him.

"Well and good. Of course you will have to stay here for the present," speaking very positively, and drawing a long breath.

"I cannot. I must go home this moment."

"How are you going to get any further?"

A tart little tongue was about to accuse him of taking a mean advantage of her helplessness, in thus making her a prisoner, but reflection checked the speech.

"I don't think you can walk," pursued her matter-of-fact neighbor; "and I am sure I cannot carry you a step farther. When I picked you up, I thought you no heavier than a feather, but now I am positive you weigh a ton."

Mr. Paul laughed a deep, mellow laugh, good to hear.

"That alters the case," she said wearily.

"This being the case," he went on, "we shall have to make the best of circumstances."

"I suppose we shall," said the girl ruefully.

"I will make you as comfortable as I know how" —

"Oh, I don't doubt it."

This was said impetuously, for pain was returning to the ankle. Her host shrugged his shoulders with a smile which she recalled later on, when she realized the brusqueness of her speech. At the time she was in silent revolt against being forced, even for a night, to exchange the dainty comforts of her paper house for the rude surroundings of a ranchman's cabin.

"But there are my dog and bird. The nights are cold. He is delicate and the bird has to be covered. And my cow and my chickens."

"First your ankle demands attention. I will ride down to the Montrose place and telephone for Dr.

Graham. Then I will come back to your cottage, and if you will not mind being left alone for a little while, biding the surgeon's coming, I will cover the bird, and feed the chickens, and milk the cow, — I think I see her in my cabbage patch now."

"Oh, Mr. Paul, I am so sorry."

"Never mind! They will not hurt her. She is not unaccustomed to the diet."

With this parting shot Mr. Paul disappeared, soon returning with the truant Sairy Ann, securing her to a tree.

"I must look up my horse, now. He seems to have strayed beyond limits, perhaps to take a reprisal on your strawberry patch," said the young man cheerfully. "But I must help you inside the cabin. The nights are growing chill."

He opened the door, and lifted her chair over the sill, placing it, as she could dimly see, beside a table. Striking a match, he turned up the wick of a heavy antique lamp of hammered brass.

"Let me lift your foot and place it on this chair. Are you sure that is a comfortable position? And you may be cold before I return."

Bringing a thick traveling-robe, he wrapped its fleecy folds around her, then stood looking down upon her, silently challenging her to meet his gaze.

"Until I return, I make you mistress of all I possess — except what lies behind the black curtain!" he added, as if in sober afterthought.

She obstinately closed her eyes, opening them again in shocked surprise as she felt a gentle touch upon her forehead, but the door was closing behind

her host, and she heard his firm step on the garden path.

Lying back in the easy-chair, Miss Judith again wondered if she were in a dream.

She found herself, it is true, in the ranchman's cabin of her fancy. The chinks between the rough-hewn logs of the walls were plastered with clay, and the big fireplace which yawned at the end of the great room made no attempt to disguise its clumsy structure of stone and adobe, and opened upon a hearth of rough sandstone flags. But the furnishings of this rough abode were of Oriental magnificence.

Rare tapestries hung on the walls, superb Turkish rugs were flung broadcast upon chairs and couches, yellowed ivory carvings alternated with rare bronzes and statuettes in the rude niches of the fireplace. A flagon of old Venetian glass, pink and white, wrought in the semblance of a rose-vine, stood on a sideboard, with a cup and saucer of fragile Sèvres beside it. Throughout the room were countless evidences of a refined taste and a free purse. Was it the magic purse of Mr. Paul's fanciful tale?

Although a certain quaint order was noticeable throughout the apartment, things were put to strange uses. A cloissoné vase was degraded to a dust-brush holder. A pair of well-worn slippers poised on either shoulder of a bronze Chinese god, a jolly little figure, with eyes that seemed to twinkle in the dim half-light. A hammer and saw were hung on either arm of an East Indian throne-chair, gorgeous in scarlet and gilt; before a door that opened into another

room a Bengal tiger's skin formed a clumsy and barbaric portière.

Here and there an unframed etching or water-color could be seen, and a dusty portfolio with knotted strings leaned against the wall; but, with all its wealth of ornament, the house was singularly lacking in pictures.

A number of late magazines were scattered over the table beside which he had placed her chair. She took up one after another, and found each in the same condition, with uncut pages, and bearing no evidences of having been handled. Several late novels were idly flung beside them, but she felt convinced that they, like the magazines, were unread, for the leaves clung together like those of books fresh from the press. In a pocket on the wall were countless newspapers, some with their wrappers torn off, but all lying in their original folds.

Upon the table stood a frame of carved silver, and in it was a portrait. She took it in her hand. It was an excellent specimen of the recently revived art of daguerreotypy, and the subject was the woman of the locket.

The lady was in evening-dress, clad in the extreme of modern fashion, with a low bodice disclosing a slender, columnar neck and shapely shoulders, full, puffed sleeves falling over her rounded arms. One slender white hand was lifted, the fingers resting lightly against her cheek.

Miss Judith studied the picture long and closely.

The lustrous dark hair was brought low over the thoughtful brow, half concealing the white temples

and the tips of the pearly ears. A stately, intellectual woman, generosity and breadth indicated by the noble forehead, a loving heart looking from the tender eyes. She returned the picture to its place with a sigh.

A peculiar whirr drew her attention to a small clock of some carved wood, standing on the simple shelf of redwood that served for a mantelpiece. As she looked, two tiny doors flew open, a brown bird hopped out, told off the hour in a succession of liquid notes, hopped back into his niche, and the doors swung after him.

Outside, in the gloom, a chorus of night birds answered his greeting. She could distinguish the mellow call of the California nightingale, and a blue jay's harsh note of defiance. Following these there came a piteous, thrilling refrain, as of some small songster for whom existence was weighed down with sorrow. After a while the nightingale relapsed into silence, and the jay ceased his jeering cry, but the small bird of sorrow flitted from tree to tree, repeating his woeful lament.

The room was large, and its shadows deep. Her eyes, growing accustomed to the semi-twilight that reigned outside of the little circle of light encompassing her, traveled to the farther side of the room, and she saw, spanning the ceiling from wall to wall, a massive dark wood carving of elaborate design. Attached to this, the heavy folds of the black curtain, sombre and sinister, hung to the floor.

"Mistress of all I possess, except what lies behind the black curtain!"

This fantastic speech recurred to the girl again and again. What was his meaning? What mystery, sorrow, or sin was concealed behind those heavy folds?

What was the secret of Mr. Paul's life? What strange circumstance or combination of circumstances could have led this man of culture into solitary exile, to live by the labor of his own hands? A traveler, too, and a man of education, who might easily have found a chair in some college or academy, surrounded by congenial associations, had his chosen business or calling failed him.

Was the beautiful woman of the portrait acquainted with the mystery? Had she a part in it? Or could it be the curtain which was dividing these two lives, apparently so dear to each other, and shadowing two souls with hopeless sorrow?

She tried to put these questions aside. She told herself that she had no desire to fathom the mystery. Could she have drawn the curtain aside by merely putting out her hand, she would not have done it.

A careless movement caused the ankle to begin paining her fiercely again. She changed her position, drawing about her shoulders the warm rug that Mr. Paul's thoughtfulness had provided her. Pillowing her cheek on her hand, she looked around her, and all the strange, weird furnishings seemed to assume a sympathetic, friendly aspect. The room was really a most restful, peaceful place. Its very atmosphere was soothing.

How had it happened that such a foolish dream

had overtaken her on the way down the cañon! Mr. Paul had shown her precisely the same degree of kindness and the same tender sympathy that he would have exhibited towards a hurt child, and she was sincerely grateful to him. She rejoiced in her heart that instead of an enemy she had found in him a stanch, true friend, — a friend who had persisted in kindness to her even when he had believed himself suffering from a most atrocious injury at her hands. A good, sensible friend. She asked nothing more. And yet, what was that queer little ache, that sensation of missing something dear and precious, — the loss of something that had never been?

She was conscious of growing drowsy, and it seemed to her that Mr. Paul had been gone a very long time. A long time to lie alone and helpless, with an aching ankle, in a strange house, and in that weird room.

Her eyes wandered again to the black curtain. She was dreaming again. Its folds were stirring, stirring, and it was not the night wind that moved them. An irresistible fascination drew her eyes to the swaying drapery, and she was conscious that its mystery was about to be solved.

It was a woman's hand — a white, shapely hand, whose counterpart she had seen in the portrait — that parted them, and while she waited, breathless and panic-stricken, a tall, stately figure advanced slowly into the room, her eyes fixed on Miss Judith's.

The girl was paralyzed with terror, and could neither move nor cry out. The lady moved slowly towards her, and at length stood beside her chair,

looking down upon her with her eyes, gray and cold, that seemed to scornfully inventory the timid sufferer, lingering on the slight, childish figure, the tumbled hair, the features now blanched with fright and pinched with pain. An ironical smile overspread the stranger's face.

"No. One cannot lose what one never has possessed. And you never have possessed it. Past nor present, present nor future, you never shall possess it. The black curtain, ay, the black curtain, cursing every one that lives beneath its baleful shadow, shall do its work."

Before Miss Judith could divine her intention, the lady had swept with regal grace across the floor, and, raising her bare white arms, gathered the mass of drapery in them and tore it from its fastenings. A portion of the time-stained carving to which it was hung fell with a crash to the floor. She dragged the black pall across the room, and with the same cold smile on her lips began wrapping it about the girl. Fold upon fold she laid over and about her, while her victim struggled, voicelessly, to push it away and to make her escape. Would Heaven never remove this awful ban upon all her faculties? Must she submit, without a protest, to this grotesque doom, to be smothered by this funereal drapery in this dreadful woman's hands? Like a child acquiring the art of speech, she began to brokenly shape words, until at length voice and the power of articulation came back to her.

"The black curtain! Help! Oh, help! I am choking!"

But still the cruel hands bound the black stuff closely about her, pinioning her arms so that she could make no struggle.

"Mr. Paul! Where are you? Save me, oh, save me! The black curtain! Mr. Paul!"

CHAPTER XIV

OUT OF THE SHADOW

"YES, yes!" said a soothing, strange voice. "We will see to that by and by. Keep the foot very still now, child, that we may place the bones precisely in line."

She opened her eyes and encountered Mr. Paul's look of compassion, and saw the gray head of a stranger who was kneeling beside her. Upon her foot, she felt a firm, practiced touch. Then a hand seized the ankle above the fracture. She turned her head, and was surprised to see that the black curtain was still in place. Was it imagination, or did she see a white hand for an instant at its parting?

"Do not move!" admonished the voice. "Only one instant now!"

A harsh wrench of the limb, an awful pain, a horrid crunching and grinding, as the bones slipped into place.

"Here, Mr. Paul! Your help, please. Hold this splint here where I have placed it."

A bandage was wound around and around, and securely fastened.

"You are to be congratulated, madam, upon this nice, clean fracture, — the thing a physician loves to see. In a few weeks the bone will be as firmly knit together as it ever was. If it had been a sprain,

now! Sprains are often ugly things. You might have been laid up for months. Only keep very quiet for the present. She will remain here?" addressing Mr. Paul.

"Certainly. There is not the slightest occasion for her to be moved," replied Mr. Paul pleasantly.

"But the black curtain, doctor!" cried the girl piteously. "I must go. I must go home to-night. It smothers me. I am afraid of it. It suffocates me."

"That is all right," declared the doctor soothingly. "Take a drink of cold water, close your eyes, and sleep."

The girl rejected the water.

"You don't understand, doctor. You did n't see. I must get away from the curtain. It stifles me. I cannot live in its shadow. Oh, I do not see how you can endure it," turning to the young man.

"It is my fate," he said in a low voice that only she heard.

The doctor laid his hand on her forehead, then wisely drew from his pocket a tiny thermometer, and placed it in her mouth. When several minutes had elapsed he removed it and consulted its scale.

"Delirium!" he whispered significantly to Mr. Paul. "A slight inflammation attendant upon the hurt, giving rise to a touch of fever. Still, the fancy is so strong it may be well to indulge it."

"And will you carry me away from the curtain, doctor? I should die if I had to live beneath it."

"That is all right. You shall go," said the doctor.

"It is a very strange fancy," said Mr. Paul, in a vexed tone, to the physician.

"It is certainly a very strange curtain!" returned the surgeon, surveying the curtain's dismal folds.

To Miss Judith's inexpressible relief the two men carried her up to the paper house that night, the doctor, who was the lighter of the two, supporting her as she limped up her winding stairway, and she awoke the next morning to the bright sunshine and cheerful surroundings of her own little home in the oak-tree.

CHAPTER XV

GOOD COMRADES

During the weeks of inaction that followed, Miss Judith learned some salutary lessons, and a sincere gratitude was the first of them. Always a spirited little being, priding herself upon her absolute independence, the help which she required, and which money could not have hired in that busy season of the fruit harvest, came to her freely through the impulse of neighborly sympathy. Mrs. Birdsall, whose coarse manners and gossipy habit were so distasteful to her that she had snubbed the good lady by never returning her first call, shone out as a rescuing angel in this emergency, showering upon the girl examples of her really excellent cookery.

Other strait-laced and uninteresting women, villagers' and farmers' wives, whose acquaintance she had disdained, sent gifts of choice preserves and jellies, and toiled up the steep road in clumsy conveyances and behind sleepy farm horses, to fearfully climb up to the cottage and lighten Miss Judith's monotonous hours with kindly chat and solicitous inquiries. Even the children, barefooted lads whose faces were unfamiliar to her, neatly dressed little boys and girls whom she dimly remembered as having greeted on farm gate or village street, came eagerly to the mesa, bearing messages and tribute

to the friendless young stranger, and expended their individual zeal in enthusiastic war upon the weeds and runners in her berry beds.

"I don't deserve it!" said the girl, in self-abasement. "They might have lain down and died, every one, and I would have been none the wiser, nor even have grieved to hear it."

She rendered secret atonement for her previous indifference by exercising a gracious hospitality towards the older visitors, and captivating the younger ones with charming tales of fairies and hobgoblins, sometimes reading stories to them out of the few books she possessed, adapting the language to their youthful comprehension.

The village clergy, Protestant and Catholic, honored her with sympathetic calls, the former urging her to join his flock when she should have recovered from her injury, while he of the brown cassock and sandals said no word of his holy calling, nor extended formal invitation to the church whose doors are always open.

Throughout the entire period Mr. Paul was most attentive, serving in all manner of ways.

"You are a veritable staff to lean upon — in seasons of lameness!" Miss Judith called to him one day, as she watched him fill the gasoline tank on her range, a task that she had been wondering how she should accomplish.

"'A staff unto my feet and a light unto my eyes,'" gravely quoted the young man. "Some day, Miss Judith, if I call upon you for the greater service, will you grant it?"

"If I can," she replied simply.

One feature of these weeks of confinement impressed Mr. Paul, while it puzzled him.

During Miss Judith's helplessness he had naturally undertaken to bring her mail from the railroad village, to which he regularly went. He could not help noticing the scant correspondence she seemed to conduct. A few letters bearing the imprint of nurseries or seed-houses, now and then one with the stamp of a San Francisco tradesman, with perhaps one or two personal letters throughout the entire period, comprised the sum and substance of her correspondence. Yet she never failed to meet him with the same eager inquiry: —

"Any letter for me, Mr. Paul?"

These appeals grew more and more anxious as time went by, until he could almost imagine that there was a note of entreaty in the gentle voice which repeated the monotous inquiry: —

"No letter for me to-day, Mr. Paul?"

He came to feel that his constant failure to bring this looked-for letter was inflicting a grievous disappointment upon her; there was an indefinable air of brooding trouble about the girl, some hope or resource was failing her.

"If it is a man, and he is trifling with or deceiving that sweet little woman, I 'd like to know it — and him!" he said grimly to himself.

Time wore on, and the letter Miss Judith so anxiously awaited did not come. After a time she seemed to no longer expect it, and often waited silently while he answered the questioning look in her eyes.

Despite her straightforward manner and almost childish candor, she was not one upon whose reserve one would willingly intrude; nor was Mr. Paul, who had his own reserves, the one to probe the hidden sorrow or to force an unwilling confidence.

"If she wishes to tell me, she will do so," he thought.

Nevertheless he noted with genuine apprehension the change that was taking place in Miss Judith, her loss of color, the singular lassitude, for which her injury was insufficient to account. Even when he one day helped her down her winding stair, and placed her in a hammock swung beneath the tree, the diversion did not cheer her.

She looked dreamily away over the landscape to where they could see a large coast steamer gliding over the water under full steam, looking in the distance like some fairy craft trailing a breath of mist.

"I wish I were in that steamer, going up to San Francisco," remarked Miss Judith, with sudden energy.

"You have not looked at your strawberry bed. I 'm rather proud of the way it has flourished under my stewardship. The water from the tunnel has given it new life. The children have worked at it like beavers, and I 've taken a hand with them now and then. It 's so full of blooms you can't count them, and before Christmas it ought to market a superb crop of berries."

She moved her head ever so little, and sent an indifferent glance in the direction of the berry patch.

"I 'm very much obliged to you, I 'm sure. But I believe I hate strawberries," she said.

"They are rather a back-breaking occupation," rejoined the young man apologetically. "Raspberries are different. They are ripening in considerable quantities now, late in the season as it is. Next week you will certainly have a generous yield for your table. That bovine racer of yours is drying up altogether too soon for a cow at her second milking, but she can certainly supply enough cream for the berries, and raspberries and cream are a dish for the gods!"

"The gods may have them, for all I care," returned the girl absently. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Paul. I did not know what I was saying. It was because I was thinking."

Mr. Paul looked down upon the earth, and in imagination ground that unknown recreant correspondent under his heel.

When Miss Judith was given a pair of crutches, and undertook to learn their use, she perceptibly brightened, for, provided even with this awkward means of locomotion, she was enabled to find occupation which created diversion for the troubled mind. Still it was evident that her thoughts were often far away, and the wish that she had openly expressed he fancied that he could often read in her face.

It occurred to him that the hope he had formed in the early days of his acquaintance with the little lady was in a fair way of realization. The tide had turned. Miss Judith was growing disenchanted

with the charms of a rural existence. One of these days, probably at a time now near at hand, she would be ready to listen to a reasonable proposition for a compromise. He would allow her a generous compensation for her improvements, and thus secure undisputed possession of the land; then he would help her to pack up the pretty furnishings of the paper cottage, and take her down to the station, there to pronounce a friendly farewell, and he would return to enjoy peaceful and undivided occupation of the coveted territory.

Somehow this prospect did not appear as enchanting as it once had seemed to Mr. Paul.

Miss Judith, who enjoyed ample time for reflection during her enforced idleness, reviewed all the events of the past year, together with Mr. Paul's every act.

"I did him what must have seemed — considering his remarkable faith in the justice of his claim to the land — the most shameful wrong, and when he spoke to me about it, I appeared to vaunt it and glory in it! If the situation had been reversed — Well, I know very well what I felt the day that I climbed the trail, believing he had deprived me of my water supply! Yet all the time he never retaliated with a single discourteous word or act. And when I so ungenerously accused him of what I myself had actually done, and forced an explanation of that wretched affair, he not only accepted my word, but took upon himself the entire blame of the misunderstanding. And after that" —

But here there always occurred a gap in Miss

Judith's reminiscences. Out of her life she had deliberately dropped a single hour, and when a man or woman intentionally drops from life any period, long or short, you may know that it must be weighty with meaning.

Out of all these reflections had grown a most magnanimous resolve, and it was this that Miss Judith was conning, some eight weeks after her accident, as she flitted busily about the cottage, preparing a meal that was to celebrate two events of importance to the people most concerned.

With the doctor's permission, she had that morning discarded her crutches, and was feeling a wonderful exhilaration at being, as she phrased it, an "able-bodied person" once more, when Mr. Paul had stopped, on his way to town, to congratulate her.

"It is a notable day to me, as well," he had said genially. "I turned my thirty-fifth milestone this morning, and began to go downhill to-day. Witness these white hairs!" and he lifted his hat in mock solemnity.

The young man could afford to jest about marks of age. His abundant brown hair was glossy as a boy's, and as yet was not threaded by so much as a single gray hair, while his face, despite the sober look it habitually wore, was free from lines and instinct with the vigor of youth.

"No man begins to go downhill at thirty-five," contended the girl. "A woman may, at thirty, but a man's way lies uphill until he reaches fifty, and even beyond. Some of our greatest statesmen have done their best work after sixty."

"The best possibilities of life closed to me a year ago," returned the young man gloomily. "It was then I drew the last coin from my purse."

"There is no last coin in the purse of a man young and vigorous," asserted Miss Judith with warmth. "A young man's resources are inexhaustible. If one thing fails him, he should turn to another."

"So I have — to cabbages!" retorted Mr. Paul.

"And Sairy Ann spoiled the cabbage patch!" cried the girl compassionately. "Mr. Paul, I owe you a birthday dinner for those cabbages. It shall be ready when you come back."

The young man's face brightened as he lifted his hat and passed on. During her long helplessness his little neighbor had been a veritable will-o'-the-wisp in moods, now receiving him in the most cordial, sisterly fashion, now puzzling him with her gay humor, and again retreating to an immeasurable distance. To-day she had returned to a frank comradeship.

Miss Judith had everything ready for that finishing process known as "taking up," when the unaccustomed sound of wheels drew her to the door. Mr. Paul had gone away on the sorrel mare's back. He returned driving the animal in a neat little hammock cart, the saddle at his feet.

"I concluded to make myself a birthday present, Miss Judith," he explained, springing from the cart. "I shall have to ask the privilege of taking my horse out of harness here, until I have a better road to my cabin. Perhaps you 'll do me the favor

to use it occasionally in return. The mare needs driving, to keep her spirits down."

His neighbor returned an embarrassed reply. The fact that she had long felt the need of some conveyance made her shy of accepting this offer. But she came cautiously down the steps, and admired the cart's graceful lines and ingenious construction.

"A cart is the proper vehicle for these hill roads," remarked Mr. Paul, as he unbuckled the harness, while the girl caressed the pretty mare after the foolish fashion of women. "No danger in turning around, you see. It revolves on a pivot."

Did the young man remember the day when she had confessed to him that she was a cowardly driver, always afraid of upsetting a conveyance in turning around?

"Miss Judith, you are a genius!" exclaimed Mr. Paul as they sat down to the small mahogany table, which, with both wings spread, would have groaned under the weight of the delicacies it held, could it have found voice.

"It is a very sad thing to be a genius," responded the girl demurely.

"In some lines, yes. But a gifted cook is always to be envied," persisted her guest. "And any one who can evolve a spread like this, away from markets, and with" —

"A paucity of material?" supplied the hostess.

"As regards variety, yes. There is no poverty of quantity. I used to count myself a fair mountain and camp cook. But give a man flour, sugar, yeast-powder, milk, eggs, and he can compose one solitary dish" —

"Flapjacks?"

"Yes, flapjacks, and flapjacks alone. Whereas a woman, given the same material" —

"Gems, muffins, pop-overs, biscuit, butter wafers, waffles, cookies, doughnuts, omelettes, puddings in infinite variety, a dozen kinds of cake!" called off his hostess, pausing, out of breath.

"After this list, I bow my diminished head."

"Oh, that is a mere nothing. Given so many ingredients, with all the different methods of cooking, and there is scarcely any limit to the changes one can play. The real art is to play these changes upon but one ingredient."

"Only one ingredient! Oh, you could n't do that unless you were a magician."

"Yes, you could. With potatoes, for instance. There need be little suffering among the poor of our large cities, if all the housewives would learn the wonderful variety of really tempting dishes that can be prepared from this one cheapest of vegetables. A celebrated cook claims that he can cook potatoes in a hundred different ways. No woman is fit to be a poor man's wife until she has learned at least twenty-five. Of course it 's highly improper to make eating the chief end of life, but the fact remains that nine tenths of the misery among the poor — sickness, dissension, discontent — is caused by ignorant or unskillful preparation of the cheap foodstuffs at their command."

"You 're turning social economist, Miss Judith."

"On a very limited scale. I know little of wages and profits, and nothing at all of basic principles.

It 's the homely, woman's share of the question that appeals to me."

"I 'm not sure but it 's the most important part," said the man thoughtfully. "Once get the Home — I speak the word with a capital letter, for it always seems to me the most important factor in society or government — get the Home properly organized everywhere" —

"And the little children properly started," put in Miss Judith. Her voice was very soft and sweet. "There is the chief mistake, — making the wrong beginnings. The world is always mending mistakes, but that early mistake is the one that can never be mended."

She spoke with deep feeling. There were tears in her hazel eyes as she looked up.

"We have to accept conditions as they are," said Mr. Paul soberly. "The wrong beginnings will be made, and the best that people can do is to mend, and to patiently keep on mending."

No complexity of courses burdened this appetizing repast. Its crowning glory was a huge birthday cake, adorned with frosting quilled over it in a fancy design, the hollows filled with cubes of ruby-colored jelly.

"If I could have found some little colored candies, I would have spelled your name upon the cake in genuine schoolboy style," explained his hostess. "This is a sorry substitute."

"It is gorgeous!" cried Mr. Paul, with a mock obeisance. "So imposing that I am afraid to cut it for fear of spoiling the pattern."

"Let me do it," proposed Miss Judith, poising the knife gracefully above it. "Oh, I am forgetting."

She laid down the knife and pushed towards him a tulip-shaped silver cup, filled with something that he took to be powdered sugar, and was about to empty in the cup of fragrant tea which steamed at his elbow.

"No, no!" she protested. "That is the test. If we are to be friends hereafter, you must take a pinch of salt; if enemies, spill it on the table."

He held the dish in his hand as if debating with himself, tilted it dangerously to one side, then set it down, took a pinch between his thumb and finger, and tasted it with a grimace.

"That settles it," said Miss Judith, who evidently attached much importance to this ceremony. "Now you may have your cake, and while you are eating it I have a proposition to make."

The young man meekly accepted a generous slab of the ornamental edifice before him, and awaited her communication.

"Now it is all nonsense for us to be quarreling over this land," began Miss Judith.

"She 's going to offer to abdicate!" said Mr. Paul to himself, with a strange sinking of the heart. Aloud he only remarked: —

"So you are getting tired of the country, Miss Judith?"

"Tired of the country! Who says I am tired of the country?"

"I could n't help noticing," said the young man

resignedly, "that your enthusiasm appeared to have died out. You don't seem to care for the berry patch any longer. You have n't asked for a necrological report upon your young chickens since they have been intrusted to my care."

"A — what kind of report?" she asked, with a puzzled face.

"Necrological. Perhaps I should use simpler language, and say a mortuary list. I 'm ready for you. I 've been arming myself with poultry statistics, in anticipation of this moment, and am ready to prove that the average mortality of chickens of a tender age is usually thirty per cent. I 've only lost forty-five per cent., and I put it to your sense of fairness if that is n't a good showing for an amateur with no pretensions whatever in the poultry line. However, I 'll consider these losses when it comes to making you an actual offer."

He was going on recklessly, warding off the announcement that he felt sure she was about to make, and lo! he had himself blundered into anticipating it.

"An offer? Explain yourself, sir! An offer of what?"

"For your stock and improvements, in case you want to sell out and go away."

He did not look like a very eager buyer, but the lady did not take his appearance into account.

"Why should you suppose that I want to go away?" she queried. "Are you so anxious to get rid of me, Mr. Paul?"

"Now, Miss Judith, what else could I suppose,

from the way you opened out on me? Is it possible that I have been mistaking your sentiments, and that you are not going to declare that you detest the country?"

Somehow a great load had dropped from Mr. Paul's mind.

"Detest the country! I love it, — love it more than ever. I do not think I could bear to go away, could endure any other life. If it had not been for this reposeful existence, I could never have survived the past four weeks."

For an instant she seemed lost in sad thought; then she rallied and looked up brightly.

"But you don't ask me what I was going to propose!"

"I am waiting for you to explain yourself."

"Mr. Paul, some day, if we live long enough, this land will be surveyed, and one or the other of us will be compelled to enter it, or lose all chance to secure it."

Mr. Paul assented.

"If you enter it, I shall certainly contest. If I enter it, — of course you have been very polite and kind to me, — but I don't think you have any more intention of giving up than I have."

"Certainly not!"

"Such a contest would be expensive, and exasperating to us both. I have thought of a way out of it."

"And what is this marvelous solution of the vexed problem?"

"It is this. Being squatters upon unsurveyed

public lands, we are entitled to enter three hundred and twenty acres. I have been reading up the law. We will divide the land. You can enter a hundred and sixty acres, and I will enter a hundred and sixty."

Mr. Paul deliberated.

"I decline to compromise. I will have all or nothing," he said at length.

"Then you prefer war?"

"On the contrary, I prefer peace. But peace on my own terms."

"And what may they be?" asked the girl coldly.

Mr. Paul looked searchingly at her. She returned his gaze with the utmost calmness. He looked away.

"Some day I may tell you. Not now."

"Oh, how vexatious you are!" she exclaimed, rising from the little table and attempting to trundle the tall screen before it. "If I had a temper" —

He sprang to help her.

"How very fortunate that you have not! But you were saying" — he innocently queried.

"Oh, if I had a temper (which you know very well that I have not, Mr. Paul), I should be very angry."

"If it would be any relief for you to box my ears" — he amiably suggested.

"Oh, if you choose to make light of it."

"On the contrary, it is a serious matter to me."

The girl eyed him curiously.

"One would never think you were so sordid," she said, with a sigh.

"I am not sordid, I am only avaricious. There is a vast difference between the two terms," insisted the young man.

"'Strange such a difference should be 'twixt tweedledum and tweedledee!'" quoted the girl mischievously.

"You are trying to exasperate me, and after salting down our friendship; but I warn you, I shall not quarrel," said Mr. Paul magnanimously.

"What a martyr he is!" remarked Miss Judith to her bird.

CHAPTER XVI

A LETTER

"For the present let us be content with matters as they are. Sufficient unto the day is the happiness thereof!"

Miss Judith smiled at this boyish speech. She had settled back into her easy-chair, looking very content.

The sun was setting, and through the open window came the low of cattle from the distant salt grass meadows bordering the tide-lands.

Mr. Paul crossed the room and stood where he could see the rosy glow in the western sky reflected in the sloughs of the salt marshes. He glanced at Miss Judith. She had lain back, and with closed eyes appeared a part of the harmonious, peaceful scene.

The young man drew from his pocket a reed-like instrument, handling it caressingly, like some living creature that he knew and loved. He placed it to his lips. A succession of round, full notes, like the soft warble of a bird, seemed to float away and lose themselves in the stillness. Then the exquisite melody of "Home, Sweet Home" rose upon the air.

At the first note Miss Judith had stirred, but her eyelids dropped again, and the player fancied that she slept.

Once, twice, thrice, he repeated the air, until a listener might almost have fancied that he heard the words of the song, tender, sweet, thrilling with feeling, blending with the air.

And now the player took the instrument from his lips and looked out into the gathering gloom. The light in the west had faded from crimson to sullen purple, the valley was lost in shadow, night creatures were astir, a bat brushed his loathsome form against the window screen.

Again he raised the reed to his lips, and this time the aria from "Norma" thrilled the night air with its sad, sweet melody.

At the first notes the look of sweet content vanished from the girl's face, being replaced with an expression of distress. She put out her hands in passionate protest, as if the melody were torture beyond endurance.

"Oh, I beg of you, Mr. Paul, stop! I cannot bear it. Do not spoil it all with that."

Mr. Paul did not consider himself a virtuoso by any means, but he ranked among his friends as far from an indifferent flute-player. A chance opportunity for study abroad under one of the first masters of the instrument, and years of subsequent practice, he reflected, should certainly give a man a degree of proficiency which ought to preserve his music from being a positive infliction, as Miss Judith seemed to regard it. He removed the instrument from his lips.

"I beg your pardon. I did not know my playing was so offensive," he said coldly.

"It is not that, but the music itself! I cannot bear it. I wish I might never hear another note in all my life."

Her guest made no answer to this tempestuous outburst, but reflected that here was a curious and, so far as his experience went, a wholly original trait of character. He had known young ladies who could not tell one tune from another, and who were wholly lacking in that fine sensitiveness to melody which alone makes the appreciative musician, to nevertheless declare that they adored music. To detest the art in the abstract was a novel affectation. Yet she seemed very much in earnest, and he could see, in the failing light, that the face she turned back into the room was downcast and distressed, as if she were repenting her confession.

"I should have consulted your wishes before I began to play," he said a little stiffly. "To tell the truth, I was not aware that any one lived who actually disliked music."

"We are all differently constituted, and I suppose all have our peculiarities," replied Miss Judith shortly.

This explanation satisfied Mr. Paul. He concluded that this singular idiosyncrasy was some hereditary affection, and might account in part for the melancholy which occasionally replaced this little person's customary cheerfulness. He had read of an abnormal sensitiveness to sound, which constituted one of the earlier phases of a disease that left total deafness as its result. Whatever the cause or character of this peculiarity, it was cer-

tainly a great misfortune. Although himself pretending to little skill in and less knowledge of the art, he was a fervent lover of music, and found in it a sweet solace for grinding care. He could scarcely conceive what it would be to be lacking in all appreciation of melody, as we can with difficulty realize the deprivations of the blind and deaf and speechless. How it must diminish one's resources, shut off one of the sweetest joys of existence!

He sincerely pitied the little woman, who by this confession seemed to have been removed to another sphere of life. His manner was exceptionally kind as he rose to go, insisting upon lighting her lamp and performing other slight offices that might save her exertion. On parting he asked after her ankle with extreme solicitude.

"You are sure that you are not overtaxing it? You know you must be very cautious for a time, if you wish to have it absolutely sound again."

"Oh, the ankle is all right!" she said, a little impatiently. "But — Mr. Paul — you did not find any letter for me in the post to-day?"

"Bless my soul, Miss Judith! You made the afternoon so pleasant that I actually forgot!" exclaimed the young man contritely, this time drawing from his pocket a bulky envelope, addressed in a man's bold hand.

The girl hurried to the light and eagerly examined the superscription, then tore it open and began to read. She ran her eye quickly down the first page, and gave a low cry. Mr. Paul was only just in time to catch her as she fell fainting to the floor.

CHAPTER XVII

MISS JUDITH'S DISAPPEARANCE

When a song-bird refuses to eat or sing, and spends the entire day moping in the bottom of his cage, gloom will often settle over an entire household. To Mr. Paul the sun shone less brightly upon the Vernal Hills, and nothing was in accord in all the charming landscape, when his blithe little neighbor, upon the receipt of this mysterious letter, drooped and lost her gay spirits, and no longer seemed to take any interest in life.

Her strength was slowly coming back, but her mood did not change for the better. Although she went patiently about her daily tasks, there was a pathetic shadow on the sweet young face, and a tired droop to her shoulders, as if they bent to the weight of an unseen burden.

Miss Judith did not often look at the photograph in her cabinet now. When she did, it was on her bended knees.

In his innocence of soul, Mr. Paul one day attempted to counsel her.

"Why don't you get a woman to come up and stay with you awhile, Miss Judith? I don't mean a regular servant girl, but some lady who would enjoy the hill air, a sewing-woman out of employment, or a teacher who is taking a vacation? Some-

body who would share your cares, and be sympathetic, and lend you companionship?"

"A woman! And woman's sympathy!" she cried disdainfully. "That is one of the very things I came up here to avoid. When one is not well, or worried, it is unbearable to be persecuted with the average woman's sympathy. She always wants to probe the innermost recesses of your heart, and drag out to the light what you have not acknowledged to your own soul. And she has her own infallible prescription, moral or physical, for every ail, and watches you like a hawk to see that you take it. Oh, preserve me from the average woman's companionship or sympathy, Mr. Paul!"

Despite this impulsive outburst, Miss Judith was by no means lacking in tender feeling towards her sex. One day Mr. Paul, returning from town, brought intelligence of a distressing case of sickness and destitution.

The children of a poor Mexican family, a mile or so away in the hills, had been taken sick with a malignant disease. The mother, in delicate health, was too feeble and too ignorant to do aught but dose the young sufferers with all manner of herb teas, concocted from native herbs and shrubs. The father, shiftless and improvident, had gone on a wild debauch when he found that his little brood was in danger of being swept away, and merciful authority had accorded him quarters in the county jail.

Tidings of their extremity had reached the valley, and provisions and clothing had been showered upon the needy family with indiscriminate liberality.

The physicians of the place courteously contended with each other to render professional service, finally conceding this doubtful privilege to the most modest and hardest-worked of all their number, old Doctor Graham. The one thing most needed, personal care and attention, no volunteer stepped forth to render. There was no leisure class in the valley, and all of the women were engrossed in their own cares. Had there been one who could have been spared, she would have debated long with herself as to whether, for her own and her family's sake, she would do right to expose herself to the contagion.

Miss Judith listened attentively to this account, but made no remark.

"A hard case, is n't it?" asked Mr. Paul, on concluding.

"Where did you say they lived?" questioned the girl carelessly.

The young man was nettled at her unwomanly apathy.

"In that tumble-down adobe on the line of the old toll-road," he said. "Beyond the oak grove on that hill," pointing to where a solemn line of oaks stood like soldiers drawn up on parade, against the afternoon sky.

"I should think they were quite off the line of travel," remarked Miss Judith listlessly.

"Yes, the road was abandoned years ago, and is barred now by half a dozen barbed-wire fences. Pico has some way of getting out by a trail through the Los Gatos cañon over here; takes all his supplies up on burros, they say."

The next morning Mr. Paul noticed that Miss Judith was late in rising. As he led Hercules to his kennel, he observed a note pinned to the oak-tree to which the dog's chain was attached. This was addressed to him. He opened it and read: —

DEAR MR. PAUL, — Will you please see that my poultry has water and food for a week or more, and take my cow up and keep her for me until I come back ? Sincerely yours,

A. JUDITH.

Mr. Paul read this message several times, then saddled his horse and rode up into the hills.

The previous evening, at nightfall, Margarita Pico had crouched before the embers of an open fire in the old adobe, with both hands pressed to her ears to shut out the moans and sighs of poor Tomasa, the youngest of her *niñitos*, — she that had but a week before been the plumpest and rosiest of the merry crowd, but who now, alas! lay in her mother's bed, with skin the color of old parchment, save where festering sores made hideous blotches upon it. There had been another, younger than Tomasa, Benito, but the angels had smiled upon him when he was yet a babe whose age was counted in weeks, and there had been a beautiful funeral in the old Mission, to which all the kindred and friends had come, and he had been laid away in consecrated ground, wearing a robe finer and more spotless than any he would have worn in this world, poor child; and Tomasa, but just weaned, had crept

again into the mother's arms, and Margarita had been comforted. And now little Tomasa was fading away, and the mother heart would be bereft.

Margarita herself had been born of very good parentage. Her parents had not been exactly aristocrats, but they had been servants in the family of an aristocrat, which is almost as good; and their children had been reared with gentle manners and a knowledge of the ways of people of blue blood, which is second best to having that blood in your veins. As a girl the young Margarita had been extremely pretty, with small hands and feet, a graceful figure, abundant dusky hair, beautiful soft brown eyes, teeth like kernels of white corn, and a clear dark skin, with cheeks as peachy as Tomasa's were when in health. Now she was stout and ungainly, her hair thin and threaded with white, her bright eyes dimmed, her teeth gone, and a little network of wrinkles marking the outer corners of her eyes, although she was only thirty-five.

Margarita had married beneath her. All her friends had deplored the day when she left the parental roof to take up life with Andronico Pico, a worthless, roving half-breed, even then a slave to the vice which had now brought him low; but he had wooed her with a savage persistence, and she had believed his fair promises.

With the gentle non-resistance of the women of her race, Margarita had submitted to be dragged to her husband's level, and the Pico house on the old toll-road was known far and wide as a place where men met and gambled away their hard earn-

ings, where strong drink was plentiful and other fare meagre, and where children blossomed and flourished like the golden-cupped poppies on the uplands. It did not comfort poor Margarita to remember that it was one of these visitors, a burly vaquero from across the sierra, whose money Andronico had won and carried to the valley for the prosecution of his drunken orgie, who had brought the dread disease to the children.

There came a soft rap at the door. The poor woman, with her hands pressed to her ears, did not hear. There was a pause, the latch was lifted, and the door gently pushed open.

Margarita dimly saw a woman's figure, halting in the open door; a graceful, ethereal being, clad in some light raiment, who hesitated, as if not knowing whether to advance or retreat.

Margarita extended her hands, palms outward, in a passion of appeal.

"*No! No! No ahora! Tomasita mia!*"

But the visitor advanced, with a winning smile, and now Margarita saw that this was a flesh-and-blood young lady, as slight and girlish as she had once been, very simply dressed in a gown of some light tint, and with such a heavenly look of compassion in the tender blue eyes, shining like stars out of her pale face, that the sad-faced little mother would still have taken her for an angel, come to bear away little Tomasa, had it not been for the small satchel she carried in her hand.

Now that Margarita realized that this strange and beautiful visitor was truly a human being, a

woman of flesh and blood, who had come to her in the hour of her extremity, when all her friends had abandoned her, she tottered to Miss Judith, and stretching out her arms like a tired child, laid her head on the girl's shoulder, and sobbed out her sorrows in a mixture of Spanish and English.

"Oh, lady, you so kind, so good come here! She will die! *Mis pobrecitos!* All so sick! *Tomasita mia!* Lady, my heart is like to break!"

"There! there! Poor little mother!" murmured Miss Judith in cooing tones, whose language all women on earth know without need of an interpreter.

Margarita controlled her emotion. She vaguely felt the influence of a superior intelligence, and realized that if she would reap the benefit of the young stranger's heaven-brought aid, she must throw no obstacle in her way. So she dried her eyes and smoothed her tumbled hair, and led the way to the beds of the children, Tomasa's last.

They stood long by Tomasa's side. Margarita scarcely dared look up into Miss Judith's face, lest she read there the confirmation of her fears.

Miss Judith put out her hand, her clean, white hand, and laid it without shrinking on the child's hot forehead, where ugly ulcers blotched the parched skin. The cool touch was grateful to the child. She ceased for a moment her low moan, and opening her eyes, gave the lady an intelligent look.

"She likes it," said Miss Judith, laying her cool hand for an instant upon Margarita's warm, flabby palm. Margarita understood.

"So hot! So hot! All time like burn!" she

said, dramatically striking her own forehead, then pointing to the child.

Miss Judith opened her satchel and took out a roll of soft old cloth, a sponge, and a towel. Partly by signs, and by uniting Margarita's slight knowledge of the English tongue with her own slighter knowledge of Spanish, she made the mother understand that she wanted water. This Margarita hastened to bring, in a shining tin pan. Miss Judith wet a cloth in it and laid it on the child's forehead, then set the dish on the hot stones of the hearth until the water was milk-warm, dipped the sponge in it, squeezed it out, and under cover of the blankets sponged the child's body from head to foot, following the sponge with the towel. Tomasa, very wide awake now, suffered this attention with an expression of great satisfaction. Only once did Margarita venture a mild remonstrance: —

"It no go in — no?" indicating the eruption.

"Oh, dear, no. It 's the very best thing in the world to bring it out," responded the young nurse.

Tomasa was very sleepy before the operation was concluded. She sipped a little cool water that Miss Judith held to her lips, then lay back with her eyes closed.

"Lie down beside her. Sing to her," suggested the young lady, humming a soft little lullaby to make her meaning clear.

Margarita's face brightened. Stretching her tired figure on the coverlet beside the child, she crooned an old Spanish cradle-song, in a queer, cracked little voice that nevertheless thrilled with mother love.

Mr. Paul would have been amazed could he have seen Miss Judith's face as she listened with unfeigned pleasure, looking from mother to child. For Tomasa first smiled, peeped from beneath her fringed eyelids at the stranger, and then in a kittenish way cuddled close to her mother, and reached out a little burning hand.

Margarita's heart was very full as she felt the little hand nestle upon her neck. The song was one she had sung to her children in turn, as she held them to her breast in their all too fleeting infancy. As she crooned the simple melody, each of them seemed to come back to their innocent, confiding babyhood, Benito last, in his fine white robe and with his arms extended. When Tomasa at length slumbered, her breath still coming and going in the harsh stridency of fever, Margarita too for a little time forgot this world's cares and sorrows in sleep.

Miss Judith laid a light quilt over the sleeping woman, hung a shawl where it would shield the blaze of the fire from her face, and turned to the other patients. Eduardo and Juanito, sturdy boys of ten and twelve, Anita aged eight, and Batisto, a little scamp of six, had developed the disease in a vigorous type, and were in turn combating it with the vigor of healthy childhood. Maria, a girl of fourteen, had a mild type of the fever, and was already convalescing.

When each of the younger invalids realized that Miss Judith's services were at their command, they proceeded to make the most of the opportunity, to Maria's great distress. Eduardo and Juanito

wanted their pillows constantly turned, their bedclothes straightened, and part of the coverings removed, and they accompanied these demands with terrible Spanish oaths, in startling contrast to their cherubic appearance. The window that rattled, one of them wanted wedged tight and the other contended must be opened. They engaged in a wordy dispute as to whose back ached the most and who was the sickest. Batisto wanted a cloth on his forehead, like Tomasa's, and he wanted to see the lady's watch, — no! not the face, the works inside. And, how did she make the little curls that fell over her forehead, — with papers like Maria, or with a hot iron like his cousin Felicia? And when he asked for a drink, why did she give him the *agua* and not the hot tea, like mamma?

Miss Judith granted, and parried, and denied these demands, as the case required, and at length had the satisfaction of seeing the two older boys and Anita fall asleep, while Batisto subsided into a mutinous silence.

When the young nurse had the remainder of her ward under control, she turned to the soft-voiced Maria, who was lying beside Anita in a corner of the great room, divided from the boys' quarters by a dingy curtain. Maria's eyes had long been full of solicitude.

"Mamma, she sleep?" she anxiously asked, in her pretty broken English.

"Yes, Maria. Beside little Tomasa."

"I so glad!" cried the unselfish girl. "She work — work all day, all night the same. And in

her arms she carry Tomasa, oh, so much! Tomasa she no like it lie in the bed, and she cry, cry all time, only mamma carry her. Tomasa very sick!" and the girl's face was sad.

"Yes, Maria. But she breathes better now. In the morning she may be better."

From Maria Miss Judith learned that Josefa and Panchito, the seven-year old twins, had been visiting their aunt in town when the family were stricken down, and that the good woman was keeping them from the contagion.

When Maria at length slept, Miss Judith made an inspection of the premises, to determine the sanitary condition of the impromptu hospital. This inspection was on the whole not unsatisfactory. The building was open to the rafters, but this insured a good circulation of air, and the big chimney and the shake roof and the chinks about the windows contributed to present a passable system of ventilation. The large kitchen and eating-room in one, which formed the second apartment of the house, was as sweet and clean as it could reasonably be kept. The spring that furnished the household supply of water was but a few paces from the back door. Best of all, for the weather was chill, there was an abundant supply of fuel.

When she returned to the main living-room and sleeping-room, she built up the fire, which was getting low, and, sitting down by the hearth, patiently watched out the rest of the night.

When the gray light of dawn came through the window, little Tomasa suddenly aroused and sat upright in her bed.

"*Mamma! Tengo hambre! Carne! Mamma!*"[1] she cried out fiercely.

Margarita was instantly awake. She tried to draw the little figure down under the covers, but the child resisted, struggling to free her arms, and calling again loudly and shrilly for *carne!*

Miss Judith could not understand the child's words, but she comprehended the meaning of the cry. She watched Margarita as the latter hastened into the rear room, where she heard her fumbling at the cupboard. Presently she reappeared with a plate, and on the plate — Miss Judith gave an exclamation of horror.

"Oh, no, no! Surely you would n't give that little sick child *ham* to eat?"

"She want it. She ask for him," returned Margarita placidly, still bent on gratifying the little child's whim.

"It would kill her. Her stomach — oh, how can I make you understand? Maria! Maria!" gently rousing the sleepy girl, "tell me, what do you call milk in Spanish?"

"*Leche!*" answered the drowsy voice.

"*Leche! leche*, Margarita! No meat! Doctor say no meat!" shaking her head as she pointed to the offending dish. "*Leche*, Margarita! *leche* — no?"

"*Si! Si!*" was the laughing reply.

The mother disappeared again into the back room. When she returned, she brought a mug of milk.

The young lady warmed this on the hearth, de-

[1] "Mamma! I am hungry. Meat! Mamma!"

spite the little girl's impatient demands. When she finally lifted it to the small invalid's lips, the child drained it to the last drop.

"Man he come!" announced Margarita, with a puzzled look, a little later. "Me no spik Ingles."

Miss Judith hastened to the door, and found Mr. Paul. When he saw her, he sprang from his panting horse, whose flanks were dripping sweat, and came towards her, looking stern and disapproving. The instant she recognized him, she retreated.

"Don't come any nearer, Mr. Paul, I beg of you! You 're directly in the breeze that sweeps past the house — past me!"

"Nonsense!" cried the young man savagely. "Do you think," he demanded, "that I will hesitate to go where a woman leads the way?"

"But there is n't the least need" — edging off from him as she spoke — "for you to expose yourself to the contagion. It 's sheer foolhardiness."

"Miss Judith!" said the young man, grasping her hands and looking her full in the face, while her eyes shrank from meeting his. "What did you come up here for?"

"They needed me. You yourself told me of poor Mrs. Pico's extremity."

Mr. Paul muttered an imprecation upon his own folly.

"But you," cried Miss Judith,— "you have done this thing needlessly and without purpose. You have no possible object or justification. Why don't you go away?"

"I will!" he said curtly, turning on his heel.

But he reconsidered the act and wheeled about again.

"So you 'll not even accept me as a helper?"

"Oh, it 's a woman's work," said Miss Judith.

"But you can't do everything. You 'll need supplies and a messenger to town. It 's absurd to think of living up here cut off from all connection with people."

"You should see the supplies we have!" exclaimed the volunteer nurse, her face dimpling with sudden recollection. "The people of the valley have been lavish with pies and cakes, and spices, and baked meats. We have everything for a feast; the only drawback is that there are no banqueters! But there is n't a particle of corn-meal or oat-meal, or anything to make gruel of, in the house. And nobody has thought to send any old cloth."

"Then let me get what you need," urged the young man eagerly.

"If you could find time to come up once a day to take down any little list I may prepare" — conceded the lady.

"I will take time."

"But you must promise to come only to a certain place, — say that clump of elders below the spring, where there will be no danger of further exposure."

"While you are hanging over the beds of those sick children, inhaling disease with every breath."

"Could it make my danger less if you shared it? You 're very irrational," said Miss Judith. "The best and kindest thing you could do would be to keep well and strong, so as to be able to take care

of me if I should fall sick, or see that I had proper care."

"I will do just as you say," said Mr. Paul humbly. "But spare yourself all you can, my little woman. If the lives of all the Picos should be saved — at the expense of yours" —

"They would be cheaply bought," said the girl positively, and a shadow came over her face. But as she turned to go into the house, he noted the tired droop of her shoulders, the expression of one laboring under a hopeless burden of sorrow.

The doctor came at noon. He made his way at once to little Tomasa's side. The child was partially propped up on pillows, holding in her arms a cherished doll of Maria's. Although still very sick and painfully disfigured, she was the picture of content.

"What have you been doing to my patient?" he gruffly asked Miss Judith, who had followed him to the bedside.

"Very little, doctor," returned the young lady, alarmed at his tone and manner. "I know so little of disease or sickness that I could only do what it seemed to me I would like to have done for myself. I sponged her a little, and kept her head cool, and her feet warm, and saw that she had milk instead of ham" —

At the mention of this latter dish the physician threw up his hands. She misunderstood his action.

"If I have made any mistake" — she faltered. "Perhaps I ought not to have tried. I 've had so little experience" —

"Mistake!" exclaimed the doctor. He timed the child's pulse, and took her temperature, and drew away her clothing to look at chest and stomach, where the eruption had been scant and dull.

"Miss Judith," he said frankly, "I expected to find this child dead or dying this morning. With care she is going to live."

Margarita understood, and knelt thankfully beside the baby, placing her arms around her. The young nurse's eyes were moist. The doctor took a hasty survey of his remaining patients, gave some brief instructions, and moved towards the door.

"It 's a blessing to have some one who can understand English, and with sufficient intelligence to carry out directions when I give them," he said. "Half the mortality among these people is due to their ignorance and carelessness. If it were not for their healthy outdoor life, the race would soon be extinct."

The battle was by no means over. There were days and nights of tireless watching, of ceaseless and menial service, of patient self-sacrifice, for Miss Judith, before the last patient was well on the road to recovery. To go into the comfortable chamber of the rich, surrounded by every convenience and with servants within call, and to minister to the wants of the suffering, is a task that often tries the most patient nurse. To enter the hovel of the poor, share its homely drudgery and its deprivations, and at the same time to render faithful service to a squad of young invalids, is a task to try an angel, and Miss Judith's wings had not more than sprouted.

In spite of all the adverse conditions, chief of which was the smiling indifference of the little Spanish mother, Miss Judith contrived to introduce a certain system into the ill-regulated household. Each day the floor was neatly brushed and the hearth swept, wild flowers gathered and put in a jar on the table, lending new grace to the dim, bare room, and all the litter made by the convalescents was put away in an orderly fashion. So untaught were the children in all that goes to make up the refinements of civilization that she often felt herself at the mercy of a horde of savages.

Eduardo and Juanito were still in bed, and Maria feebly creeping about, when Margarita herself drooped, refusing food, and taking to her bed.

"Miss Judith, you are already worn out, and ought to be discharged," said the physician that day, viewing her doubtfully.

"Not while there is anything left to be done!" replied the lady bravely.

"It 's a shame to ask it, but do you think you can help me through this case?"

"I 'll try, doctor."

That night another baby was born into the old adobe, a puny little boy, whom the mother gathered to her breast as gladly and proudly as if he had been her firstborn.

Toward morning, when Miss Judith went to see if mother and child were comfortable, she found Margarita wide awake, but in a deep reverie. She stretched out her hand and patted the girl's slender fingers.

"You good me. Good lady. *Muy bonito* baby. No?"

"Very pretty!" approved Miss Judith.

"I been think I name him Andronico, for my poor man!" And Margarita began to weep.

So Andronico, languishing in the county jail, where there was neither drink nor cards, had his sorrows assuaged by the tidings that a son and namesake had been born to him that day.

What did it matter that a month later the baby died? He was buried in a fine white robe like Benito's, and in a white and gilt coffin whose splendor dazzled Margarita's eyes.

This coffin was Andronico's peace-offering to his family when he returned to its bosom after serving out his term of exile. Its magnificence so captivated Margarita that in recounting its glory she quite forgot the little baby who slumbered so peacefully against its satin lining, calling it by turns Benito and Andronico. What would you have? Did she not still have Tomasita?

CHAPTER XVIII

A MYSTERIOUS TRYST

"It must seem good to be out of doors after breathing that polluted atmosphere for weeks," remarked Mr. Paul, coming upon Miss Judith, who was diligently pruning a climbing rose whose crimson blooms already reached the doorsill of her eyrie.

"The wonder is that people ever live in houses," rejoined the girl. "I have burned every thread I wore up there, but I feel as if I myself ought to be aired and fumigated."

"My promised occupation has not materialized. You don't show any symptoms of sickness."

"No. The doctor's disinfectants may have had something to do with it, but nature helped. Whenever I caught an hour's rest, it was out in the sunshine, lying on a blanket under a bush or tree. The fresh air I drew into my lungs drove all the microbes out. I can't get enough of it now." And she stood erect and drew a long, deep breath.

"Then come with me on a drive down to the village. I promise you your fill all the way."

She hesitated. A hundred little unfulfilled duties claimed her; but the day was charming, the invitation alluring, and human nature weak.

The road zigzagged down the mesa, entering a thicket of mountain lilacs hastened into premature

bloom by the mild December sunshine. The clusters of delicate blue blossoms brushed against them, filling the air with their sweetness. Mr. Paul broke off a little branch and placed it in her hand.

"Pure and fragrant as the perfume of a good woman's life!" he reverently remarked.

Miss Judith made no reply, but held the blooms to her face. The simple tribute appealed to her, and brought her dangerously near to tears.

Modestly laboring in the squalid adobe, she had little guessed the sensation that her course had created in the small community below. As they drove through the village streets, she found herself the recipient of an uncomfortable amount of attention. Hats were everywhere lifted, and heads bowed low as she passed. Children stared at her. Women left their marketing or shopping to solicitously inquire after her health and to applaud her courage. It was a relief when they at length escaped from the thickly populated quarter and took their way in the direction of the lower settlement, where a miscellaneous collection of warehouses clustered near the railroad, and where Mr. Paul wished to negotiate for seed for his spring planting.

Near the station, on the edge of the salt marsh, a rude camp had been established under a clump of willows. Cooking operations were in progress, and they could see around the open fire a gang of tramps grouped. A young man, better dressed than the others, stood a little apart, looking up the road. As he heard the rattle of cart-wheels, he gave a hasty glance at the occupants, then quickly

wheeled about, turning his back to them. Miss Judith bent over and looked back at him as they passed. As they approached the station, she spoke in what she tried to make a brisk, business-like tone, but which sounded very weak and tremulous: —

"Please stop at the depot. I must see the agent about something. Wait at the warehouse for me until I come."

Something in this sudden resolve and unexpected statement impressed Mr. Paul with its insincerity. He helped her out, and drove slowly on, without looking behind him. Had he done so, he might have seen Miss Judith walk straight through the depot and out upon the opposite platform, where a path led off over the fields.

Mr. Paul finished his business at the warehouse, and decided to disregard Miss Judith's request and return to the depot for her. Indeed, he was quite sure that she could by no possibility find the station agent in at that hour, as no train was due until late that night. For this reason it surprised him a little that he did not meet her coming along the road. As he had expected, the office was closed and the station deserted. Moved by a vague apprehension, he drove rapidly back to where they had seen the tramps' encampment. In the edge of the field Miss Judith stood, talking with the man they had seen. Her hand was on his arm, and her whole attitude seemed to be one of entreaty. Apparently the fellow yielded a sullen consent, for he awkwardly lifted his hat, and Miss Judith, not seeing Mr. Paul, turned and walked swiftly back in the direction of

the station. To whip up his horse and fly back over the road, screened by the willows which lined the fence, was the work of a few moments, and Mr. Paul was waiting there in patience when she came.

The girl's veil was tightly drawn, and Mr. Paul felt sure, without seeing her face, that she had been crying. With exceeding delicacy he did not appear to notice that anything was amiss, but drove along back streets until they gained the quiet and privacy of the hills.

The sun was low on the horizon, and the chill of night was in the air. He picked up an extra robe that he carried and wrapped it about her shoulders, — an attention that she recognized with murmured thanks. They had reached the mesa, climbed the last terrace, and drawn up in the shelter of the oaks before she spoke or seemed to acknowledge his presence.

It is not in human nature to heartily sympathize with hidden suffering. Mr. Paul could not free himself from a feeling that Miss Judith had not shown proper confidence in him.

"I am afraid the ride has been too much for you," he said, as he lifted her from the cart.

"No, oh, no!" she protested, in a dreary little voice. "The fresh air is always good for one. It was kind of you to take me."

"Then I shall expect you to go again," he said politely, occupying himself with a refractory buckle on the harness.

"I feel as if I never wanted to go anywhere again," said the girl wearily, her voice breaking.

The young man made no response or comment.

Miss Judith pulled a handful of lettuce leaves and fed them to the sorrel. Mr. Paul waited, ready to twist the hitching-rope into a hackamore about the animal's nose.

"I wish I could consult you about something, Mr. Paul," she said at length desperately.

"If my advice would be of any benefit, I am sure you are welcome to it," he replied stiffly.

She looked at him searchingly, but shook her head sadly.

"No, no. It would never do. Men are too hard on men. They do not know what it is to be charitable and forgiving."

With this equivocal statement she left him.

CHAPTER XIX

A STORMY INTERVIEW

Mr. Paul went along the cañon trail feeling decidedly uncomfortable. He knew that his manner had not been such as to invite Miss Judith's confidence, and he could not blind himself to the fact that she seemed greatly in need of a wise and sympathetic counselor. But he could not conceive of a more distasteful office than to advise Miss Judith in an affair involving another man.

As he went about his chores that night, other misgivings assailed him. What relation did this strange man bear to the girl, that he should be capable of causing her such sorrow? He was plainly some one near and dear, for she had placed her hand on his arm, and had humbled herself so far as to plead with him. Was it some unworthy lover, or could he hold a nearer and dearer tie? In this Western land women were often married and divorced, and resumed their maiden names, and new friends were none the wiser. This suspicion he instantly put away as unworthy of himself and impossible to her. Whatever secret her life held, deceit had no part in it, he knew. What a heroic soul she was, loyal to the call of duty, facing horrors from which others fled, patiently devoting herself to the service of the lowly, then serenely return-

ing to her own simple duties! He had acted like a churl when she had been ready to bestow her confidence upon him. He resolved that he would go up to the paper cottage that very night, and humbly ask her to trust him, assuring her of his stanch support and sympathy, whatever the troubles that beset her.

It was later than he expected when he finished his work that night, so late that he was afraid his neighbor, who kept early hours, might have retired, and he hastened over the trail, walking lightly, that he might not disturb her in case she should have already sought her couch. As he reached the top of the trail, he saw that her light was still burning brightly, but the next instant he paused in consternation, for in the vicinity of the oak-tree he could plainly hear two voices, a man's and a woman's, raised in excited argument.

Mr. Paul's first impulse was to retreat as quietly as he had come. He remembered Miss Judith's lonely and unprotected situation. Upon what errand had this strange visitor come, who had thus invaded the peace and privacy of her home?

Two figures were standing under the oaks. He knew the slight girlish form to be Miss Judith's, but so changed was her voice that he could not have recognized it.

So absorbed were the pair in impassioned speech that they did not heed him as he walked towards them. Hesitating for a moment, he stepped forward and boldly presented himself before them. The light from the open door of the cottage streamed

down upon them, making a luminous circle in which the two figures stood. Miss Judith was facing a boy, a lad of man's stature, but with a boy's handsome, unformed, shamefaced, indecisive countenance.

The young fellow shrank back, surprised and silenced at Mr. Paul's intrusion. His appearance did not startle or dismay the girl. Perhaps, in her tense mood, it was a momentary comfort to find some one upon whom she could call to witness her despair and shame.

"See him!" she cried. "My brother — my only brother, Mr. Paul. The boy my mother gave me as a sacred charge upon her dying bed. The pride of my girlhood, the hope of my womanhood. The only living person to inherit and hand down our name. Oh, that I should have to say it! — he is a thief. A self-confessed thief, who has robbed the employer who trusted him. Look at him! See dishonor written in his face. A thief and a coward, running away from the just consequences of the crime he has committed. Oh, go! go!" she suddenly cried, turning upon the lad, her hand uplifted as if to banish him forever from her sight.

"I 'm willing," said the boy doggedly. "I did n't want to come up here. You know I did n't. It was accident that brought me to the station. I was trying to keep out of your sight, trying to get out of the country. You followed me and made me promise."

There were unshed tears in his eyes. His flushed face quivered. Miss Judith did not see. She went on in the same strained voice: —

"You have ruined your life, Rob, and mine. Disgraced our name! I can never hold up my head again. I never want to see your face again as long as I live . . . never hear your voice" —

"Be silent!" commanded Mr. Paul sternly, laying his hand on her shoulder.

Miss Judith looked at him in amazement.

"You don't know what you are saying, — what you are doing! Go back to the house. Leave him to me."

He had taken her hand, and was leading her, unresisting, to the foot of her stair. All her fierce indignation and passionate resentment seemed to die away at his touch.

Bowing meekly under his reproof, and without speaking, possessed now only by hopeless sorrow, she suffered him to guide her. On the stair he paused for a hasty word.

"You don't understand boys. Women never do. Go to work and get that lad the cosiest little supper you can. He 's hungry and tired. He 'll never forget it. Be cheerful and pleasant when we come back. Don't say another word about this trouble!"

Mr. Paul hastened back to where he had left the young fellow, but he was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XX

BOY AND MAN

ALONG the bluff, where the road took its first plunge towards the valley, the young man could dimly see a moving figure, fast vanishing into the night. Mr. Paul was but an instant in deciding upon his course. He took a bridle-path through the chaparral, and in a few minutes came face to face with the boy, who was recklessly making his way to the coast.

"Rob, I want to have a talk with you."

"Oh, I 'm going!" said the lad defiantly. "Straight to perdition, where she 's sending me. I 've got over a good piece of the road already!" and he laughed harshly.

Mr. Paul laid his hand on the fugitive's arm.

"Come with me!"

"I beg to be excused."

"Come with me!"

"Not much!"

"Come with me."

"I won't."

"Come with me!" The grasp of his hand tightened.

"I 'll be hanged if I will!"

"You 'll be hanged if you won't."

Rob wrenched himself free, and would have

started on a run for the valley, when the clenched fist of a trained boxer shot through the air and fell like lightning on him, and he measured his length across the road.

"How do you feel now?" asked Mr. Paul anxiously, a few minutes later.

Robert Judith was sitting propped up against the bank at the roadside, very much dazed, while Mr. Paul was applying his own handkerchief, dipped in cold water, to a big bruise on the side of the lad's head.

"All right, I guess," replied Rob doubtfully. "What happened to me, anyhow?"

"I think I took the right spot," said Mr. Paul, still a little solicitous, comparing the two sides of the boy's skull. "The moonlight is deceptive, and you dodged just as my fist came down."

"You 're a queer fellow!" said the lad, after a few minutes' silence, noting the tenderness of the man's ministrations. "What did you do it for, anyway?"

"It would be better to kill you outright than to have you return to that kind of life," replied Mr. Paul frankly.

Rob laughed again, and this time there was nothing but healthy amusement in the sound. But the light mood passed swiftly away.

"What do you want of me?" he asked.

"I want to take you up into the hills and make a man of you."

"You can't. She 's tried. Others have tried. I 've tried, — God knows I 've tried! It's always a losing game."

"Tell me all about it, Rob."

"Cards, and wine — and then stronger drink. Some of the men got hold of us boys. I was getting a fair salary this time, and had begun a little bank account. I 'd kept fairly straight, but always wasted all I made before. With money in bank, I felt as if I 'd made a real start. But they found it out. It all went, and more. They called them debts of honor, and taunted me about them. I knew the combination of the safe. Captain Norcross trusted me."

"Norcross, of the Great Western Traffic and Navigation Company?"

Rob nodded.

"A decent old chap, but a queer manager. Gives his clerks their head, then reins them up short, and wants to shoot them when they jump the traces. How much was it, Rob?"

"Thirty-five hundred. There were three of us. The others got most all the money, or I 'd have been out of the country before this. The officers are on the watch for us everywhere. I don't see how I got this far."

"Suppose you get out of the country. What then?"

"Where people did n't know me I could make a fresh start, maybe; and live right, and build up a good reputation" —

"Knowing all the time that you were a liar and hypocrite, and had left this unpaid debt behind you, to the world and to society," supplied the man.

"Oh, I know it 's no use," said the boy desperately. "But there are other things one can do."

"As, for instance?"

"Better let me go, Mr. Paul. I promise you I 'll keep straight. I give you my word, this is the last thing I 'll ever do to disgrace my friends. The moon's setting, and there 's only enough light to show me the way to the camp."

The young fellow stood up, looking very erect and manly.

"I 'll let you go only on condition that you 'll confide your plans to me," said Mr. Paul.

"Oh, I know it 's no use my trying to do anything more," said the boy sadly. "But I do know a fellow who will sleep in the shed at the station to-night, who has a revolver that shoots straight. I don't think he 'll mind my using a single cartridge."

His voice was steady, and the grim purpose with which he had started out could be plainly read in his young face, as the moonlight fell full upon it.

"And break your sister's heart?"

"It 's broken already. Do you think I did n't care to-night? Every word she said went through me like a knife. She shan't suffer any more on my account."

Mr. Paul threw an arm around the boy's shoulder, with a gesture of comradeship.

"Rob, why do you suppose your sister came up here?"

"I don't know. I never thought," said the boy.

"I never knew before. It has puzzled me very much to see a young, gently bred, delicate woman

like her, coming up into this wild country and trying to establish a home. She has worked very hard, Rob, and cheerfully performed many tasks that few women would undertake. And she put so much enthusiasm into her work, — her home-building! One day, several weeks ago, a letter came, and before she had finished reading it she fainted away. Do you know what was in that letter, Rob?"

"I suppose so," said the boy, in a choked voice.

"Then I knew there was somebody, somewhere, she was thinking of as she toiled," continued Mr. Paul. "But from that day all the heart seemed to have gone out of her work. Rob, I believe she came up here to try to make a home for you, — she, that frail, delicate little woman!"

"Poor little Amy!" said he, gulping down a sob.

Amy! Amy Judith! It was the first time Mr. Paul had heard her Christian name. How the pretty girlish name softened and sweetened the austere surname.

"Rob," he said, "do you know what life in the hills is like; do you know what it is to dwell on these sunny heights, apart from all temptation, where the days are filled with healthy work and healthy thoughts, and the nights bring sweetest rest? Can you fancy what it is to rise to the music of bird songs, to learn to know and love every tree and flower that grows, to read the story of the rocks, to spend your holidays exploring mountain recesses where no human foot has ever trod? Do you understand how souls reach their full stature away from the vices and striving and unrest of the city?"

To the boy who had been for days fleeing like a hunted thing, disgraced, hungry, weary, and foot-sore, the young man's words seemed to conjure a forbidden paradise, over whose entrance hung the flaming sword.

"It 's too late. If I could only have been started so!"

"Make a fresh start now, Rob, and on the right basis. Take a good rest to-night, and to-morrow write a letter to old Norcross, telling him where you are, and how you feel, and asking him to give you a chance to repay the money. He 's not a revengeful fellow. Like most rich men, you 'll find he 'll prefer to measure retribution in dollars and cents. Ask him to give you time."

"And you think he 'd do it?"

"Try it. I 'll help you to devise ways and means."

"But — Amy?"

"Don't mind the harsh words she said to-night, Rob. No doubt they were not half as harsh as you deserved, but she did n't mean them, just the same. She was all unstrung with grief and worry and exhaustion. She 's been doing what not another woman in the valley would do, — nursing a lot of little Spanish children through the smallpox in an old adobe, up in the hills. She 's had no regular sleep, or proper food, or civilized comforts for weeks."

"Poor little Amy!" said her brother.

They climbed the trail to the paper cottage, where the light streamed out of an open door, in which

stood Miss Judith, clad in her prettiest gown, to welcome the prodigal and efface the memory of that sorry earlier home-coming.

"Amy!" cried the boy, and his voice was a prayer for forgiveness.

"Rob! My dear brother! I have so wanted you to make the little home complete."

In the bright lamplight Mr. Paul could see that the boy was gaunt and ragged. The suit he wore, of expensive cloth and stylish cut, showed earth stains, and had evidently been slept in; but his cleanly appearance testified to the power of early breeding.

In the house a little table was decked with spotless damask and dainty dishes. A tea-kettle was singing, and a savory odor came from a covered pan on the stove. Mr. Paul would have retired, but both sister and brother were plainly so anxious to have him stay that he remained. Amy placed a chair at the table, and urged Rob into it.

"I know you 'll enjoy a good home meal, late as it is," she said. "You see I have n't forgotten your likings, Rob," uncovering a nicely browned egg omelette of generous proportions. "And I make my own bread and my own butter," pushing each towards him in turn. "And this is my own cow's milk. It 's so different from the city, where everything has to be bought from other people, and you never really know what you are getting."

"They taste good, I can tell you, Amy. You always were a glorious cook," said the boy, between mouthfuls, for he was ravenously bolting all that

was set before him, with an appetite born of long tramping and fasting.

"Your sister has so wide a range of accomplishments in the cooking line that she quite overawes me sometimes," said Mr. Paul. "I have a single really artistic achievement" —

"Flapjacks?" suggested the girl.

"Flapjacks!" avowed the young man proudly. "I 'm ready to meet Miss Amy in a flapjack contest any day."

"Mr. Paul is a better sailor than he is a cook — or farmer!" explained the girl. "His especial talent is the reefing of small craft in a gale."

"Miss Judith, people in paper houses" —

"Rob, I leave it to you if my paper cottage merits so many jibes. Is n't it a dear, cosy, comfortable little home?"

"Not exactly mediæval in structure, perhaps, but an abode that nobody could capsize with a mere breath!" supplied Mr. Paul.

This little badinage relieved the strain that was on them all. Rob looked from one to the other of the bright, animated faces with manifest enjoyment. He surveyed the interior of the cottage with new interest. So unusual a structure appealed to the boyish love of novelty.

"You don't mean to say that it is made of paper, Amy! All this oak graining, and the frescoed ceiling and paneled walls?"

"All make-believe, but just as pleasant and serviceable as wood in this climate, and not a quarter its price. To be sure, it has its drawbacks and its

disadvantages. It 's necessary to keep the furniture well balanced, and you have to be rather circumspect in your movements. I tipped over my broom the other day, and it went through the wall. It teaches one careful habits, too. You don't feel like leaving matches around promiscuously, or driving nails at random, or leaning on door-knobs. But you are forgetting your tea, Rob."

She poured out the amber liquid, sweetening it with a couple of lumps of sugar, and passed him the cream-jug. With the cup halfway to his lips, he stopped and scrutinized the ware.

"Mother's willow cup. Do you remember it, Rob? You will find many of the old home-belongings up here. The chair in which you are sitting is the one in which she used to sit and hold you when you were a little fellow, — the big chair that used to stand in the corner of the nursery, Rob!"

The boy hastily swallowed the tea and looked down on the chair, his face working. He had been trying to get away from the old recollections, trying to discard the home ties, but they were very dear, — he had not realized how dear until now that he found himself again in their toils. The girl's voice went on, tenderly, cheerily: —

"Nothing can quite take the place of the old home things, Rob. We 'll hold fast to them as long as we live, won't we, dear? You don't know what a help it is going to be to me to have you here. I'm afraid I 'm a very ambitious farmer. I plan so much that I 'm not able to carry out. But now, with our two pairs of hands and your strength —

Why, Rob, what a man you have grown since I saw you last!"

How he sorrowed to think that his moral stature had not kept pace with his physical; but in that moment he resolved that if God would grant him grace to accomplish it, he would yet retrieve the past, and become a man in whom this dear sister could honestly take pride.

"But you, Amy? You 're not looking as strong as I hoped to see you."

"I had a little accident that confined me indoors for a while. And I 've been tired and troubled. But it will be all right now, Rob. Never fear!" she said, with a wan little smile.

"And that old trouble?" the boy asked softly.

"Just the same, Rob. It will never be any different. I must put all thought of that aside."

But here Mr. Paul, who had long since betaken himself to the far end of the room, and who had been trying to interest himself in a book while keenly conscious of all that was taking place, came forward to say good-night.

"It is late now. I must go over to my cabin. Rob had better run down and see me in the morning, and we 'll discuss plans together."

"How far away from here do you live?" asked the boy innocently.

"Only a stone's throw. Merely across the gulch."

"Is it possible! How fortunate you are in having such a near neighbor, Amy."

"Very fortunate!" attested Miss Amy, but she looked at Mr. Paul with a flash of satirical fun.

"Your letters gave me the impression that you lived a long distance from anybody else; that your land extended half a mile on either side, all cut up with gulches and rough country, and you had the wild mountains back of you."

"I shall have to tell you, Rob, that my letters were correct."

"Then, where does Mr. Paul's land come in? Oh, I see. He 's living on your land, farming it on shares or under contract."

"You are mistaken, Rob. So far as titles go — which is not very far in this case — I am on my own land," insisted Mr. Paul.

"Then I can't see, — oh, are you both close to the edges of your tracts, near section lines?" pursued Rob, with a boy's inquisitiveness.

"I like your tenacity, Rob," replied Mr. Paul. "It 's a good trait, and should be rewarded. I see I shall have to explain this matter. To begin with, your sister and I are both on unsurveyed government land."

"Oh, I see" —

"On the contrary, I fear you have just reached the point where you will begin not to see."

"And every actual settler on government land, before a survey is made, is entitled to enter three hundred and twenty acres when the survey is filled," put in his sister.

"Now we are coming to the facts, Rob. It 's a blessing to be exact," bowing before the girl, who resented this attention with a little shrug.

"Nearly four years ago, Rob, I camped on this

land, and I decided then that if the world or fortune should ever go back on me, I 'd come up here and spend my declining days."

"Oh! 'Declining days'!" exclaimed Amy.

"The day came when the world went back on me," continued Mr. Paul, disdaining to notice this interruption. "I packed my gripsack" —

"With a black curtain!" put in Miss Judith.

Mr. Paul gave her a reproachful look. Whatever the mystery of the black curtain, he permitted no light reference to it.

"I beg your pardon," said the girl, under her breath.

He acknowledged the gentle apology with a look so sad and wistful that her heart ached over her hasty speech. But he went on, resuming his tone of playful seriousness: —

"So I came up here, intending to turn farmer and live by the sweat of my brow. I had great plans and roseate expectations. Of course I meant to begin in a very modest way" —

"Planting cabbages and onions!" suggested the girl mischievously.

"For the sustenance of my neighbor's cows," supplied Mr. Paul quickly, at which the girl momentarily subsided. "No one ever builds such magnificent air-castles as the poor California farmer, Rob. You 'll find out, when you get to work yourself. And no one ever has his air castles topple down so persistently. I intended to keep my cañon as nearly as possible in its wild state, — a charming little natural park. The hills I meant to plant with

olives, and along the benches, ranging downward towards the sea, I designed setting out all manner of fruits of every clime, according to the altitudes. I planned to widen the brook at one point into an artificial lake, stocking it with trout. The hills back of me formed a great natural preserve for game. I had never seen a more secluded, peaceful spot than this was when I first beheld it."

"And before I came," murmured Miss Judith.

"All these delights and privileges, and the quiet and seclusion, I intended to keep to myself for a while, until I got over grieving for the loss of my purse."

"I did n't know you had lost any purse," put in the boy, aggrieved by the omission.

"Oh, did n't I mention it? Well, I had," said the young man placidly. "When the time came that I could forget, I meant to hunt up other fellows, friends of mine, who are all the while using up or throwing away their purses, — their fairy purses, Rob! — and ask them up here for a while, — make it a sort of hospital for disappointed ambitions, decayed hopes, wasted efforts, — do you see?"

"I see," said the boy seriously.

Miss Judith was listening very gravely now.

"I knew Uncle Sam had this tract ready to give away for the asking, if one would comply with certain conditions. I came up here ready to faithfully keep my part of the contract with the paternal government. I brought lumber and nails and tools, prepared to turn carpenter, joiner, woodsman, and mason. One morning I went about building my

house, a good, solid, substantial dwelling, as you 'll admit when you see it, Rob. And while I was blistering my hands and breaking my back over it, your sister had this cottage put in a wheelbarrow, and a man trundled it up here and set it in place, and she claimed priority of settlement on the strength of it."

"A wheelbarrow! A great four-horse team!" contended Miss Judith.

"Never mind! I won't stand on trifles!" announced Mr. Paul, with a grand wave of his hand. "But there 's the situation. Priority of settlement! Of course the land is n't surveyed yet, and may not be till we 're gray-headed. Meantime we have a magnificent, legitimate, desperate land-feud."

"And I spoiled all your Utopian plans by coming up here," said Miss Judith; and no one could have told whether she spoke in genuine compunction or in irony.

"Yes, you spoiled them, completely and utterly," said Mr. Paul. "My air-castle is in ruins. You spoiled them, for the simple reason that no man can properly nurse disappointed ambitions, decayed hopes, or mourn over wasted efforts, with a woman around. And this is the reason: she will stimulate him to new efforts and new ambitions, and put new hope into him."

A thoughtful silence fell upon the three. The young man broke it in a very prosaic way.

"Excuse me, Miss Judith," he said, "but have you the necessary bedding to make this young man comfortable for the night?"

"There is a comfortable couch," she said, pointing to the window seat with its soft upholstery. "As for coverings, — oh, I can contrive."

"There is n't the slightest need of contriving, when I have more blankets than I can use, and it 's a perpetual conflict to keep the moths out of them. Come down to my cabin, Rob, and we 'll see what we can find. Good-night, Miss Amy!"

They descended the tree warily, and stopped for a moment under the oaks. With the setting of the moon the night had grown very dark. Coming out of the bright lamplight, they had to wait a moment to accustom their eyes to the darkness.

Mr. Paul's ear, trained to all mountain sounds, caught the sharp clink of a horseshoe against a rock in the distance. He waited, listening.

"There is a body of horsemen coming up the trail from the valley," he said.

The boy trembled. Weeks of flight from arrest and constant fear of apprehension had shaken his young nerves instead of hardening them.

"The officers!" he whispered.

"Wait a little, Rob, and hark."

And now they could hear the sound of men's voices coming up the hillside, and again these had paused, debating together, at a point below.

"I think this road will take us there," said one.

"I don't trust roads that I don't know," said another. "Better keep to the trail. It 's more direct, and I know will carry us there."

"Perhaps I 'd better give myself up, Mr. Paul."

"By no means. It may be only a party of hunters

going over the range," said Mr. Paul. "But it 's as well to keep on the safe side. Be off to my house. Follow the trail, and you 'll go straight to the cabin. If you hear me whistle, take to the chaparral above. We must protect you from arrest until you have a chance to communicate with Norcross," he explained. "I think I 'll let Hercules loose to serve as a sort of outpost. You need n't be afraid of his attacking you. He 's seen you with me."

The great dog was loosed, and with a bound and a furious bay, tore off down the hill toward the valley, while the boy disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXI

AN OLD FRIEND

An excited chorus from the horsemen proved that the big dog was successfully holding them in check.

"Don't run, Sedgwick! It 's always safer to face an animal like that. Nice fellow! Good, goo-od doggie! Come here! There 's a clever fellow. Get out, you ugly brute! Is there room on that branch for me, Sedgwick?"

"Don't take the gun, Blake. Give him one over the head with the tripod."

This latter speech relieved Mr. Paul's fears. Posses of officers, trailing their prey through mountain wilds, do not usually include tripods in their armament.

"Halloa there!"

"Coming, gentlemen."

Mr. Paul hurried down the hillside.

"Dick Fowler, upon my word!"

"Bless my soul, Paul! How do you happen to be up here? Been establishing that retreat or hermitage you used to talk of?"

"I have a little shanty up the gulch," returned the young man modestly. "But how do you happen up here at this time of year? Going to make the survey of this township?"

"Not yet. We 're on our way over the range,

where some wrangling Englishmen have put up for a survey of land not worth two bits a square league. Is that your dog?"

"I 'm acquainted with him," replied Mr. Paul discreetly.

"Thank Heaven! I 'm delighted to meet with even a distant acquaintance of the monster's. Is your acquaintance of sufficient standing to justify you in calling him off? You see he 's got my transitman up a tree, and has scattered the rest of my force throughout the brush. I 've exhausted all my blarney on him, and, failing in fair measures, was about to try foul, when you opportunely — for the dog — arrived."

"Here, Hercules!" shouted Mr. Paul, following the command with a whistle.

The great dog instantly obeyed the call, leaping and frolicking about him like a puppy.

"The ravening beast is subdued," announced Fowler oracularly. "Now, gentlemen, I think you may advance without further risk to life or limb. Zaccheus, come down out of your tree!"

The man with the tripod, a stout, clumsy fellow, descended from his high perch amid the shouts of his comrades.

"Oh, you may laugh if you like, boys," he said, "but I tell you it was a matter of life or death. The beast all but had me by the leg. As it was, he got a good piece of my garments."

"I was never more serious in my life, Sedgwick," avowed his chief. "In truth, it was a valiant retreat. For all that, I 'm convinced, from the way

you lit up that tree, that you 're planning to desert the profession for the circus ring. What 'll you take to repeat the performance, Sedgwick?"

"All I can say is that I 've got to lay up for repairs before I cross the range. I 'd have provided myself with a suit of armor, if I 'd known such bloody attacks as this were to be expected," grumbled Sedgwick; and now they could see by the starlight that he was holding one hand behind him, a performance rendered necessary to conceal sundry ravages in his apparel made by Hercules' teeth. This discovery was greeted with another roar of laughter.

"The most opportune meeting in the world!" exclaimed Fowler, clapping Mr. Paul on the shoulder. "First you save us from annihilation at the fangs of this ferocious monster, then you present yourself in the guise of an angel of mercy, to heal the devastation he has wrought; for, being a bachelor, you of course have a needle and a waxed end always at hand, and will place them at poor Sedgwick's disposal."

"Gentlemen, my poor cabin and all its contents are at your command. If any of you want a little arnica or court-plaster, or a piece of boiler-plate, you 're welcome to all you can find."

"That 's hospitality of a royal sort!" cried the merry Fowler. Then, more seriously, he remarked: "I wonder you find it necessary to keep such a formidable guardian up in this Arcadian region."

"I think I told you he was only a passing acquaintance of mine," said Mr. Paul impatiently.

"The truth is, I have a neighbor, and my neighbor has — the dog."

They had reached the head of the bridle-path, and the paper cottage could be dimly seen in the starlight, nestling like a dovecote in the oak's sheltering arms.

"By George! What 's that light in the tree? Ghosts?" queried one.

"It 's only a cottage. A paper cottage," quoth Mr. Paul.

"How in creation did it come up there?"

"Oh, it was originally set on the ground. Moving up there was an afterthought," was the considerate and discreet reply.

The men stood still and marveled.

"Is it your house?" asked Fowler.

"No, my neighbor's," explained Mr. Paul. "Mine is further on."

The curtains of the cottage were drawn, but a light could be observed, dimly burning within. Mr. Paul spoke aloud, and cheerily, that the anxieties of the lonely watcher might be relieved. "Of course you 'll put up with me to-night."

"If it won't be an imposition" —

"And you can survive my hard floors and humble fare! No *pâté de foie gras* up here, Dick."

"As we expect to live on bacon and beans for the next six weeks, we ought to be able to get along without any flummeries for breakfast. Are you really established up here, Paul? Actually turned ranchman and following the plough?"

"I 'm afraid the plough does n't enjoy much fol-

lowing, but I 've been up here two years, and mean to stay, Dick."

The cabin, dark and silent, seemed to rise out of the ground as they approached under cover of the tall trees. Only the host perceived the dark figure that moved towards the rear as they climbed the steps. He struck a light, and excusing himself, went into a back room and thence to a rear door, where he passed out a roll of blankets to the lad waiting there, saying quietly: —

"It 's all right, Rob. Nothing but a party of surveyors passing over the hills, an old friend of mine in charge of the outfit. They 'll be off at daybreak to-morrow. Good-night, my boy. Hurry back to your sister."

While the other men wrapped themselves in their blankets and bestowed themselves in divers nooks for a good rest, the two friends sat up far into the night.

In the course of their conversation, Fowler drew out a shabby-looking leather-bound book, and after consulting some dim notes, turned to Mr. Paul as one who asks the solution of a problem.

"I thought my memory could n't have failed me, Paul, and my old field-notes confirm my recollection. Unless I 've gone astray on all landmarks in the darkness, this should be just about the geographical centre of the half-section you selected for settlement when we were up here together."

"I think it is," said Mr. Paul.

"And your lines are about half a mile to the east and west."

"As nearly as I can calculate," returned the young man, "my cabin is pretty close to the middle."

"Then how in the name of common sense does that house come here, less than twenty rods away, in that tree on the mesa above?"

"My neighbor put it there," replied the young man meekly.

"With your consent?"

"Nobody did me the honor of asking 'my consent.'"

"Hang it! You don't mean to say some one got ahead of you in the matter of settlement? That would break down your entry, — make you liable to trespass."

"As nearly as I can make out," explained Mr. Paul, "our acts of settlement were simultaneous."

"That makes a deuce of a case. Could n't you bluff him?"

"My neighbor is not to be bluffed."

"And in possession, too, which makes nine tenths of any case. Of course you both have the same advantage, so far as that goes; but when it comes to a contest, two men, each with the proverbial nine-tenths' hold on the title to oppose to each other, make up the ugliest kind of a situation."

"I judge so," said Mr. Paul.

Fowler ruminated for a while. At length his face brightened.

"Do you remember that corral we built hereabouts, of brush and logs, to confine our animals when we camped up here three or four years ago?"

"I remember very well," said Mr. Paul.

"Is that corral still in existence?"

"It is. With a little mending I make it serve the same purpose to-day."

"Then you 've got 'em!" shouted Fowler joyfully.

"How 's that?"

"That corral constituted an act of settlement. All you 've got to do is to go before the Register and swear to the building of that corral four years ago, and you 'll knock their claim higher 'n a kite."

"You feel sure of this?" asked Mr. Paul doubtfully.

"Sure? Why, man, it 's the whole thing in a nutshell. It 's absolutely conclusive. In such cases everything turns on 'priority of settlement.' And you 've got me for a witness."

"I don't doubt that your word would carry great weight, Fowler," said Mr. Paul weakly. "I 'm sure I 'm much obliged. But I would n't like to tax you" —

"Tax be hanged!" returned Fowler more heartily than elegantly, for he had grown enthusiastic in the espousal of his friend's cause. "I 'll do more. There 's no use in your being bothered with this confounded interloper any longer. Before we start up the mountains to-morrow, I 'll go over and see him myself. I 'll climb his tree and beard him in his paper house, and I 'll explain to him his exact legal status. I 've got the United States Land Laws at my tongue's end. I 'll quote him every section and every amendment to every section, if

he wants to hear 'em. I 'll show him that he 's nothing more nor less than a squatter. I 'll tell him he 's rendering himself liable to damages for trespass every hour he remains here, — that you can bring claims against him for rent and pasture and the deuce knows what not. Oh, you leave him to me. I 'll scare him out of his boots!"

"Fowler — really — you 'll do me a favor if you won't go near — this neighbor of mine. I 'd rather go about the thing peacefully, don't you know? The survey 's not made yet. There 's no occasion for stirring up trouble."

The embarrassed manner in which Mr. Paul uttered these protests, his craven attitude upon the subject of his rights, perplexed his friend.

"Old fellow, this is n't like you. I never thought, Paul, you would stand tamely by and submit to such imposition. Indeed, I used to think you something of a fire-eater. What sort of a desperado is it that has quartered himself upon you? I 'm curious to see the fellow. I think I 'll pay him a visit to-morrow morning, in spite of your objections."

"It is n't a desperado. It is a woman!" said Mr. Paul.

It was the surveyor's turn to exhibit a craven spirit.

"A woman! A woman and a land claim! I 'll be hanged if I go to see her!"

Fowler paced the room in excitement, upsetting the little Japanese god in the course of his peregrinations.

"A woman, eh? Then you 're in for it, old fel-

low. A woman and a homestead claim! Heaven preserve us! I 'll keep as far out of the case as *I* can. Don't you be summoning me as a witness, mind you! The bravest officer in the special service of the General Land Office, and the most efficient, once told me that he 'd rather face an armed troop of cowboys trying to hold down a range, than one woman with a homestead claim to contest. Do you know what I 'd advise you to do in this case, old boy? Light out, while your scalp 's whole. The longer you stay, the dearer you 'll rue it."

Before the two men parted the following morning, they stood alone together in Mr. Paul's great living-room.

The black curtain, seen by daylight and in sharp contrast to the bright sunlight without, which laid a flickering bar across the floor, looked grimmer than by lamplight. There was something so depressing in its sinister folds that Fowler shuddered as he looked upon it.

"Paul," he said, speaking earnestly and laying his arm affectionately on the other's shoulder, "I think I understand. But why do you keep the dismal thing hanging there, forever before your vision? If you have given up everything, burn your bridges behind you. Separate yourself from every reminder of the past."

"You can't understand, Fowler. No one but myself can comprehend," returned his host. "I 've no idea of mounting a death's-head at my feast, a symbol of mortality to damp all earthly joys. I 'm not of a morbid temperament, Fowler, but this thing has

struck deep into my life. I keep the black curtain here, and what is behind it, as the pagans of old used to carry about with them the ashes of their loved and lost."

"As well build a house upon a grave!" muttered the surveyor, but his words did not reach Mr. Paul, who, dismissing the subject abruptly, as he invariably repulsed any reference to the black curtain, had stepped to the window and was consulting the sky.

"We shall have rain, Fowler, — rain before night. Do you see that gray fringe drifting along the sierra, from where it dips down into the sea? Rain always comes when that ragged fringe trails along the mountains."

"Then we must be stirring. I want to make camp ten miles up the Las Cruces Cañon before night," cried Fowler, rolling up his blankets and proceeding to arrange his pack.

CHAPTER XXII

AN APPEAL FOR CLEMENCY

"Now, Rob," said Mr. Paul, a little later that same forenoon, "under what circumstances did you leave the employ of Norcross?"

"After I took the bonds, — they were United States four per cents., Mr. Paul, — I was in misery every hour, knowing their loss would be discovered, sooner or later. I could n't bear to look Captain Norcross or any of the men in the face. So I threw up my place: told him I could n't stand the indoor work, and had a chance to take a place on a coffee plantation down in Guatemala. That was the place I was aiming for when I came here, you know."

"And how did you learn that the theft had been discovered and fixed on you?"

"Why, it stands to reason the bonds would be missed, and I knew it would be a clear case against me from the first," answered the boy, wide-eyed. "All the others were trusted old employees, — had been with Norcross for years. As for knowing the officers were following me, — I tell you I have n't taken a step since I left San Francisco that I have n't been conscious men were dogging me. At every town and station I 've stopped, there 's been a man on the lookout. I 've been quizzed and followed, and hunted right and left. Sometimes I think Nor-

cross has followed me all the way, playing with me as a cat with a mouse, ready to clap his hand on me the moment I start to leave the country."

"If this is so, don't you think it 's a little strange that there has n't been a single word in the daily papers about either the loss of the bonds or your flight?"

"If there has n't! But are you sure? I have n't seen anything but a stray paper now and then," said Rob thoughtfully.

"Your sister tells me that she has kept a careful watch on the papers ever since the letter you sent her, — you know when! — and she 's sure there has n't been a line on the subject. How do you account for that?"

"I don't know, I 'm sure. It is n't like Norcross to spare a fellow's feelings or name when he has a clear case against him."

"But suppose this is n't a clear case. Suppose that all the detectives you have met and the men on the lookout for you have been mere phantoms of your own uneasy conscience. You yourself say there were others who knew the combination of the safe, others who had access to it. How do you know but that the loss was not discovered until it seemed plain that the bonds must have been taken at a date subsequent to your employment in the company's service?"

"I never thought of that," said Rob.

"It appears to me quite within the range of possibility that you may not have been so much as suspected," remarked Mr. Paul. "The evidence may

seem to point clearly to some other man's crime. They may never gather sufficient evidence to convict him, or even to arrest him upon. He may merely rest under suspicion all the rest of his life. Under the circumstances, why should you incriminate yourself by writing to Norcross?"

The boy had been listening attentively. At this suggestion he raised his head and his eyes blazed.

"Let an innocent man suffer for my fault? I 'd rather go to prison all the rest of my life!" he cried.

"You 're the right stuff, Rob," said Mr. Paul quietly.

He brought paper and pen and ink, and set them before the boy.

"Tell him in your own language and in your own way," he advised. "Don't mince matters, or try to excuse yourself."

There is not space here to set down the labored epistle in which Robert Judith made confession to his old employer of the dastardly wrong he had done him, and humbly asked for time in which to restore what he had taken. To own one's error under the pressure of a verbal inquiry, be it kind or harsh, is a wholly different matter from deliberately volunteering, in black and white, the story of a man's undoing. Beads of sweat stood on the lad's forehead when he had finished, and the hand which held out the sheets to Mr. Paul trembled as if the muscles had been put to some hard strain.

"A good, straightforward statement!" was the young man's only comment, but the look of friendly

confidence that accompanied it warmed the heart of the youth, who but the day before had felt himself an outcast from his kind.

Days must necessarily elapse before an answer could be expected. This period of waiting was one of almost intolerable suspense to the lad, and only a degree less trying to his sister and Mr. Paul. Would Captain Norcross appreciate the boy's frank confession and the manner in which he had cast himself upon his mercy, and show him compassion, allowing him a reasonable time in which to make up the sum he had taken; or would he, enraged and vindictive, at once place the young fellow under arrest, and see that he had meted out to him the full penalty of the law, making of him an example to evil-doers, a warning and a menace to his remaining employees?

The mail route that connected the Vernal Hills with the city was devious and roundabout. They reckoned that fully a week might pass before the answer from Norcross could reach them, for that a prompt response would certainly be sent to a communication of such a character they could not doubt. When a week and two days had elapsed, and still there was no word from the stern old captain, the delay seemed inexplicable.

In these days Rob wandered about like an uneasy spirit, unable to settle down to any fixed plan or routine of work, feeling each hour pregnant with grim possibilities. His sister and Mr. Paul did what they could to interest him and to divert his mind, but upon all rested the shadow of foreboding.

CHAPTER XXIII

A MOUNTAIN OF GOLD

"Rob, I want to send a messenger over the sierra to Fowler. Some dispatches have come for him, and I must get them to him at the earliest possible moment. How would you like to undertake the trip?"

Rob hailed this diversion with relief.

"If you think I can find my way!" he said modestly.

"You could n't lose it, or get far off the trail, if you tried. Now and then you 'll find a path branching off to some claim or ranch, but they are little traveled, and if you chance to go astray, a few minutes will set you right. If you start at daylight to-morrow, my sorrel will easily carry you to old Ortega's place before nightfall, and a couple of hours' travel the next morning will take you up the Las Cruces Cañon, where Fowler is encamped."

Moody and depressed, Rob started out on his journey, but before he had reached the summit of the range, the elasticity of boyhood had asserted itself, and he was in buoyant spirits. It was impossible not to feel the exhilaration of the hills. The great solitudes, the sweet silences, the commanding heights, lifted his soul into a new altitude. What were temptations and weaknesses, that they

could not be resisted? What were trials and humiliations, that they could not be patiently borne? What was calamity, that it could not be bravely met?

In the smiling valley nestling beside the shining sea, in the busy towns which scattered like the crested waves of some great storm-tossed ocean beyond, were infinite possibilities of usefulness, of honorable conquest, of achievement.

Had some wise philosopher studied how best to heal a human soul sore wounded and defeated in the world's harsh conflict, he could not have prescribed a better tonic than this lonely ride amid the wilds of the Coast Range. Self-communion is a discipline which weak natures successfully avoid when surrounded by the thousand and one distractions of city life, yet it is the corner-stone of character-building, and no great nature, sound, massive and well poised, was ever reared without it.

The meals he prepared for himself on the way may have been ill cooked and more poorly served, but it seemed to Rob that nothing he had ever eaten in a city restaurant could compare in flavor with the crisp, half-burned slices of bacon and cup of hot coffee made ready over a bunch of dry twigs beside the trail. No sleep was ever sweeter than the rest he enjoyed on the earth floor of Juan Ortega's adobe dwelling.

At the surveyors' camp he was greeted with a hearty welcome, for he brought not only the dispatches, but mail and newspapers to men who were cut off from civilization. Fowler urged him to

prolong his stay and go hunting with the party up a branch of the stream where they were encamped, promising him a wild-cat skin or two, with a chance of seeing a grizzly, but the sky looked threatening, and Rob reflected that it would never do to get caught forty miles away from any settlement and over impassable trails, with the letter from Norcross awaiting him, and regretfully declined the invitation.

Feeling sure of his route on his return trip, he had more leisure to observe the country through which he was traveling. It seemed strange to find himself so near the coast and convenient to seaports, and yet in this vast, unpeopled region. Owing to the range that rose westward, shutting off the sea, the district was subject to greater extremes of heat and cold in summer and winter. But a few hundred feet above Fowler's camp, snow was already lying in shaded gulches, cumbering the boughs of tall pines with its fleecy mantle. Yet this was a region of splendid altitudes, rivaling the coast strip in climatic advantages, well watered and wooded, and dotted with countless fertile little valleys which might easily be made to provide support for a large population. That it had at one time been densely populated was demonstrated by the abounding relics telling of vanished races, great tumuli marking the site of ruined villages, broken stone implements, and dim paintings on towering cliffs.

Rob paid little heed to these signs and tokens. His eyes were more frequently fixed on the rugged heights bounding the northern horizon, often barren

to their summits and royally tinted with rose, purple, yellow, green, blue, — all the colors of the rainbow. Was it possible that nature had created these majestic hills as so many useless barriers, barren, unproductive, interrupting communication and traffic? Were they not rather mammoth storehouses of treasure, to which no man had yet found the key?

The thought fascinated the boy. Sometimes he observed, afar off, towering heights of a pale rock formation banded with the green of malachite. Other cliffs were rose-red in spots, looking as if monstrous rubies had found a setting in their bosoms. One distant peak presented a solid front of glistening white. Near at hand, the ledges were weather-worn and moss-grown, and yielded little satisfaction when he clipped off fragments in passing, but along the banks of small streams which he crossed, he picked up fragments of quartz, jasper, and feldspar, many tinted, and in some measure portraying the glories of the hidden ledges from which they had been torn.

That night he encamped, from choice, on the shore of the Santa Ysabel, that broad river which fifty miles further north, after many stately windings and turnings, finds its outlet in the Pacific Ocean. A projecting rock offered an ideal shelter, and there Rob spread his blankets, while his horse grazed upon the luxuriant grasses that fringed the river.

There were trout in the stream, but he had no fishing-tackle, and could only watch their glistening

shapes dart past him as he breakfasted the next morning. The stream, shallow and dwindling to a mere thread in summer, was now swollen with winter rains. Above his camping-place it rippled through a narrow, rocky channel, and at the point of its exit a hill of red earth or clay rose to a considerable height, distinctly contrasting with the soil about him, which was a sandy alluvial on the bottom lands and a black leaf mould on the hillside.

Watching the yellow sands as the river rippled over them, Rob remembered having seen, on his trip along the ocean beach, the profitable placer mining for years conducted by Chinamen above and below this river's mouth. The gold found in these placer claims was washed down from the mountains through which he was now traveling, but although experienced prospectors had searched them time and again, no quartz ledge could be found which would account for the presence of the precious metal in such quantities on the beach. Yet if the gold were actually carried down by the river and deposited along the sands of the ocean beach, why should not similar deposits occur higher up, at the place where he was sitting, for instance? He resolved that as soon as he had finished his breakfast he would take his frying-pan and wash a little of the sand, as the miners were accustomed to try fresh places along the beach.

With this fascinating sport in prospect, it is to be feared that he made quick work of the remainder of his meal. As soon as he had drained his tin coffee-cup, he began to scoop a hole in the sand

with it, this and his shallow frying-pan being his only available utensils. Although water seeped in and filled the hole almost as fast as he could bail it, he came at length to a streak of black magnetic sand, which he recognized as the gold-bearing deposit in the Chinese diggings. This he ladled into the pan, rocking it and swashing it about in the shallow water as he had seen the miners do. It was slow and discouraging work, for the pan held but a handful of sand, and although he filled it again and again, not the slightest "color" rewarded his exertions.

Rob now advanced up the river-bank, scooping other holes and making repeated tests, but the result was always the same. When he reached the point where the red hill interrupted the course of the stream, he eyed it curiously. It seemed to be composed of a stiff, pasty material in which small pebbles and fragments of rock were imbedded.

"You 're queer-looking stuff, but I 'm going to have a try at you!" he cried.

The clay was peculiarly tenacious, and he was obliged to take his jackknife from his pocket and pick away at it before he could loosen it. When he had secured a fragment, he pulverized it between some smooth, water-worn stones before placing it in the pan. Then he stooped down beside the river, extending it at arm's length and rocking it mechanically, paying little attention to its contents, but watching the trout as they flashed up and down stream. After a while he saw that the earth had been washed away, and that the pan was empty. He

listlessly looked at the bottom before refilling it, "to give the red hill another chance," as he mentally phrased it.

Empty? What were those glittering yellow particles lying on the black iron? He bent close to the pan and counted one, two, three, four! Tilting the pan to one side, he counted again, with the same result. Perhaps it was only mica, — "fool's gold." He poured a little water over the yellow grains. Mica does not lie, dull and heavy, in the bottom of a pan, with a current of water flowing over it.

Amazed at this result, not daring to credit the evidence of his senses, Rob spread out his handkerchief and laid the yellow grains upon it. He dug out another chunk of the red clay and washed it in the pan, very circumspectly this time, tilting it carefully, and vigilantly watching lest an unwary movement should wash earth and all into the river. When the clay began to dissolve and mire the water, he cautiously removed the pebbles with his fingers, and afterwards picked out the tinier fragments of rock with painstaking touch. This time there were a full half dozen of the yellow particles in the bottom of the pan.

Hour after hour the lad continued his labors, undisturbed by any passing travelers. It was only when a light mist began to fall, and he realized that the promised storm was at last upon him, that he packed up his traps and began the ascent of the Vernal Hills.

Robert Judith was a good enough arithmetician to be able to calculate an approximate measurement

of the red hill. He realized that if a few spoonfuls of earth, handled by inexperienced hands and with the awkward utensils he had used, could yield half a thimbleful of gold, there was untold wealth in the entire hill, with its thousands upon thousands of tons.

He had gone up into the mountains a beggar and an outcast, trembling before the prospect of arrest for a beggarly sum of misappropriated funds. He was returning a Crœsus, with unlimited riches waiting only for his taking. How absurd seemed the troubles which had weighted him down! He could pay back the trifling sum he had taken from old Norcross ten times over — could buy him out — defy him in the courts. He 'd only like to see Norcross attempt to dictate terms to him!

Generous thoughts mingled with these triumphant reflections. Amy should never know another want or care. He would build her a beautiful home, surround her with every luxury, do everything in his power to make her life a bright and easy one. If people were not disposed to treat him civilly or showed any inclination to throw up his old mistake at him, they would just leave the country altogether, he and Amy, and take up quarters in some gay foreign capital, London or Paris. A fellow he had once known, who had got into some trouble in San Francisco, had gone to Paris and was living like a prince there, he had heard. In those foreign capitals people were not so confoundedly impertinent and prying as they were in America. They were content to take a fellow for what

he was. They didn't ask uncomfortable questions about what he had been.

As for Mr. Paul, — well, Mr. Paul had been a pretty decent sort of fellow. He would take him into the thing in some shape or other: perhaps give him enough to set him up in business by and by.

He left the horse at Mr. Paul's cabin, which was closed, and with a springing stride and a lordly air, strode along the trail leading to the cottage and climbed the steps leading to it.

Amy came to meet him, an expression of relief and welcome dispersing the clouds on her troubled face, as she saw him. Mr. Paul was there, and in his hand he held an open letter.

CHAPTER XXIV

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT

"You have been gone so long. I've been worried to death about you. And you are wet and tired, Rob."

"Nothing but a little dampness. It's only on the outside," said the boy indifferently. "And tired! Not a bit of it! I could tramp a dozen miles more. In fact, I've had such rare fun, I'm thinking of going back to-morrow morning."

Had fear and anxiety and the lonely journey turned the young brain and the lad gone daft? His hearers listened to him in amazement.

"I've no doubt it is very novel and interesting across the range, Rob," said Amy gently. "But just now we have something of importance to consider. Mr. Norcross has written. You were not here, and we didn't know when you would come. So we thought it best to open the letter. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. It's all one to me," returned Rob flippantly.

"I knew when I saw the bulky envelope, Rob, that its contents wouldn't be agreeable. When people have kind acts to perform, they can generally put their promises into few words. Still, we had no right to expect anything better."

"What has the old man to say?" queried Rob irreverently.

"It is n't a pleasant letter, Rob, and its terms are hard," his sister went on, feeling that he should be forewarned, if he fancied there would be an easy way out of his difficulties.

"Oh, I expected he would try to make some kind of a Shylock bargain. I was prepared for that," returned Rob jauntily, reaching for the letter.

Amy could not understand the singular change in his tone and manner, but her heart was like lead in her bosom.

"A deuce of a hand!" declared Rob, examining the superscription of the envelope. "There 's only one thing more complex than the old captain's handwriting, and that 's the inscription on the Rosetta Stone."

Rob moved to a window to get in a better light, and began the perusal of the closely written sheets.

The letter began as civilly and coldly as if it had been addressed to one of the old gentleman's formal business acquaintances: —

MR. ROBERT JUDITH, —

Dear Sir: Your letter of the — inst. received to-day, upon my return from a trip up country. I will not dwell upon the painful shock of the intelligence it contains, nor expatiate upon the iniquity of betraying the trust which I, as your employer, reposed in you, for the simple reason that if you have not already realized these for yourself, no words of mine could make you feel them.

. . . Yet, whether you 're acting on your own impulse or under advice, I like the spirit in you which stands up to confess your fault and take its consequences, and feel like meeting you halfway and giving you a chance to redeem your error. . . . I don't know whether it might n't be considered compounding a felony, to let you go scot-free from punishment, but it seems to me a man does a better service to society and to himself when he saves a boy from wearing a felon's stripes and becoming a charge upon the community, and at the same time offers him an opportunity to make good the injury he has done, than when he pockets his loss and puts the offender behind the bars. So I 'll give you twelve months to make those bonds good, Robert Judith. Twelve months, no more; and the sum must be repaid with interest in full. But I 'm not making this concession as an empty form, intending to let you off if you fail to raise the money. I 'll take your note for the amount, indorsed by some responsible man. With the friends you have, you should have no difficulty in securing this indorsement, if you go about the matter in earnest and show an industrious and sober spirit. But mind my words: It 's only on parole I 'm placing you. I 'll have an eye on you all the time, and if you don't keep your compact and the note is n't met at the expiration of that time, I 'll know you are not sincere in making this proposition, and I will see that you pay the full penalty of the law for your offense.

Truly yours,

EDWARD NORCROSS.

P. S. I don't know whether you will care to learn that your confession has relieved an innocent man from suspicion.

The odd commingling of kindly impulse and keen commercial interest, the queer philanthropy which could find exercise only in strict harmony with the writer's material interests, might at another time have provoked the amusement of the three, but so deeply absorbed were two of them in considering the letter's provisions that they passed its incongruities in silence.

"One year's grace! It 's a pretty short shrift, Rob," said Mr. Paul.

"You can never do it!" cried Amy, in despair.

"Oh, yes, I can!" said Rob confidently.

"This is no question of 'can' or 'can't.' We *must* do it," said Mr. Paul. "But we 'll have to put on our thinking-caps, my boy, and do some bright planning, to work our way out in so short a time."

Through Rob's excited mind there coursed a conviction that Mr. Paul was acting more than decently: he was really behaving handsomely in thus frankly enlisting in a project to raise what must seem to him — poor fellow! — a prodigious sum of money. And he evidently had a hard enough time to scrub along himself, judging from the sorry look of his garden, of which the boy had caught a passing glimpse. He would do more than set Mr. Paul up in business. He would take him in as a mining partner, full and square division.

"I don't think we 'll have to plan so very hard,"

said the young fellow, with what seemed to his hearers a reckless bravado.

"Why, Rob, what are you thinking of? It 's a very large sum of ready money to raise, and our resources are so limited. At the very best, we 'll have to plan, and contrive, and work our fingers off to get it," said Amy chidingly.

"I don't propose to work or plan, but I 'm going to have the money, — piles of it, and to spare!" said Rob tranquilly, sticking his hands in his pockets and looking down upon her; and the secret he had brought back from the mountains was in his sparkling eyes.

He pulled out a handkerchief, a boy's linen handkerchief with a ragged hem, now damp and grimy and tied up in a wad. With nervous fingers he undid the knot and spread its contents before Mr. Paul's astonished eyes.

"What do you call that?" he demanded triumphantly.

Mr. Paul carried the handkerchief and its contents to the light.

"Call it?" he said pleasantly. "There 's only one metal that has that dull yellow sheen and weight. I call it placer washings of the very richest sort. No light flakes, but little compact grains that weigh down like the miniature nuggets they are. Where did you get them, Rob?"

"No, sir, I 'm not going to think, or plan, or work," said the boy rejoicingly, disregarding Mr. Paul's inquiry. "I 'm not going to do it because I know an easier way of making money. I have found a mountain of gold!"

CHAPTER XXV

ROB TELLS HIS STORY

"A MOUNTAIN of gold!" said Amy Judith incredulously.

"A mountain of gold!" exclaimed Mr. Paul, and in his voice there was also a skeptical note which Rob did not fail to observe, and he silently cut down Mr. Paul's share as a prospective partner.

"Yes, a mountain of gold," declared Rob, with dignity. "At any rate, if this is gold, — and even Mr. Paul seems disposed to acknowledge it is, — there 's a small mountain of the same stuff where it comes from."

"My dear boy," said Mr. Paul, "I 'd like only too well to have you find a whole mountain range of gold, but when all the expert geologists in the country and all the surviving Forty-niners have prospected these mountains and assert that the formation absolutely will not admit of its presence, what am I to think? "

"Oh, think that I 've been tapping the till of some old Greaser over there, as I did with old Norcross."

The boy was so carried away by the excitement of his remarkable discovery that he felt as if some wheels in his head had been loosened, and was scarcely responsible for his reckless speech.

"Why, Rob!" said his sister, in a shocked voice.

Rob brought himself up with a round turn, schooling himself to think steadily and to weigh his words.

"I didn't realize what I was saying, Amy, truly I didn't. I've been so hopeless, and knocked about in such rough places this month past, and now to have this wonderful thing happen" —

She understood, without need of any further explanation. She patted his hand gently, and Mr. Paul ignored the rudeness of the speech.

"Where did you find it, and how did you come to chance upon it, Rob?"

"I was thinking, all the way home, about the gold strung along the beach at the mouth of the Santa Ysabel River, and the mystery of where it came from, for you know everybody says the river brings it down. Then Fowler and his men were stuffing me with a fable about the 'Padre's lost mine,' — telling me how the old Mission fathers had hoards of gold that they used to get somewhere up in the mountains, and how one of them died and the secret of the mine's location had been lost. I didn't take any stock in the story, for I could see they were guying me and trying to stir me up about it. But it set me to thinking and watching out as I came back."

"As thousands of men have thought and 'watched out,'" said Mr. Paul smiling; "I among the number, Rob. But go on with your tale."

"I chipped away at every rock and ledge I passed within reach of, traveling on foot almost all the

way," continued the boy. "But the most of them were nothing but rotten old sandstone, and I was disgusted. When I came to where the trail crosses the river, I camped there for the night."

"Under the shelf of rock? I know the place."

"Close by there I saw a big hill of some red stuff, that seemed to have risen out of the bed of the river."

"I remember it," said Mr. Paul. "It is conspicuous because it differs so from everything else in the country around. Fowler and I picked away at it a little. He said it took its color from the cinnabar in it, but was n't rich enough to work for quicksilver. And as quicksilver and gold are inconsistencies in any geological formation" —

"I don't care a straw for inconsistencies or geological formations," interrupted Rob somewhat incoherently. "It 's from that very hill that I took all my 'pay dirt,' and if you don't believe me, here 's a chunk of the dirt itself that I brought along to show you."

Mr. Paul took the stuff in his hand.

"It certainly looks like the cinnabar earth Fowler and I examined," he said quietly.

"There 's a monstrous lot of it, and the water 's right there to wash it with," pursued Rob exultingly. "It 's a big fortune right in sight."

"Blessings on you for a tenderfoot, Rob!" said Mr. Paul. "No miner of experience would ever have looked twice at that red hill. Learning and experience are serious bars to progress. It 's the

ignoramuses, who have nothing to unlearn, who are making the world over, these days."

"I don't care where you rate me. It 's the shekels I 'm after," said the boy smartly. "Do you wonder I snap my fingers at old Norcross now?"

Neither the man nor the woman answered. Over Amy's face there swept an expression of keen pain. Rob went on briskly: —

"We ought to get ready to go over right away, Mr. Paul. Don't you think so? The Chinamen up around Point Sal have a simple way of washing out the dirt with a string of riffles. There 's timber over there, and it would be easy to build them on the spot. It seems a pity to lose any time."

"You 'll have to lose time now, Rob. There 's no crossing that trail in this weather, to say nothing of the lack of shelter if we were there. Listen."

There was no need of this injunction. A heavy shower was falling like a rain of bullets on the roof of the paper house, making a deafening clatter.

"Here 's a pretty go!" exclaimed Rob fretfully.

"Merely a lesson in patience. We have to take them all along the way," rejoined the young man.

Rob paid little attention to this speech. He was examining the postscript to Captain Norcross' letter.

"Hello! What 's this? 'Relieved an innocent man of suspicion!' My soul! I wonder if it could have been Brainerd. Brainerd 's the very pink of propriety and uprightness," he explained, turning to Mr. Paul. "And conscientious! Lord, how conscientious! He would n't touch so much as a

pin, if he had n't a clear title to it. Actually used to lecture the boys when they took stamps for their personal letters from the company's drawer! It would be a rough one on old Brainerd, if they thought he had taken the bonds."

CHAPTER XXVI

"WAITING TILL THE CLOUDS PASS BY"

BEFORE Mr. Paul left that day, they held a serious conference on the subject of the note exacted by Norcross.

"I don't see any use fussing over that!" cried Rob impatiently. "Just wait till this rain stops, and we get over to that mountain of gold, and I 'll paralyze the old captain by meeting his demands a year ahead of time."

"Norcross will expect an answer to his letter inside of forty-eight hours," insisted Mr. Paul. "Until he has the note and accepts it, he may count himself free to retract his promise."

"But the 'responsible person' whom he requires to indorse it! I don't see whom we could ask," said Amy hopelessly. "We have n't a near relative in the world. I can't think of a single friend upon whom I would dare to call. And he requires it. He will not accept the note unless he has the indorsement. He says so very positively."

"I wonder if he would accept me," said the young man diffidently.

"You!" cried Rob, in a tone that was far from complimentary.

Mr. Paul smiled.

"Before I lost my fairy purse, people had some

confidence in me. It would be interesting to ascertain whether they have lost it. And I used to know Norcross slightly, as I think I once told you, Rob."

He did not add, as he might have done, that he had once been the honored guest of this same millionaire, and had sat at his host's right hand at a dinner party where many prominent guests were assembled. Instead, he found himself seeking Amy Judith's eyes, and was surprised to see that they were filled with tears. Somehow, although she did not clearly understand Mr. Paul's fable of the magic purse, any reference to it always touched her deeply.

That night the note was drawn up in due form, Mr. Paul wrote his name upon the back, and, adding a few lines to Norcross, himself sealed and addressed the communication to the rich shipowner.

This storm was a memorable one in the history of the Vernal Hills. It was not only the heaviest of the season, but it broke the Signal Service record, bringing the heaviest rainfall registered in all that region since the clerk of the weather went into office.

Along the coast, wharves and piers suffered great damage, warehouses were flooded, and harbors shoaled by the powerful currents of débris that swept down from the mountains. Streams ran at high flood-mark, fences and buildings and bridges were carried away, cattle were drowned, and havoc was played with every nicely cultivated hillside, the ground being cut into vertical furrows to afford

channels for the rain, so that it looked as though gigantic ploughs had taken their way straight down the slopes.

The small brook running between Mr. Paul's cabin and mesa, which had been completely dry all the fall, overflowed its banks, making a torrent that was for a few days impassable.

For six days and six nights the rain poured down almost without cessation. At the end of that period the weather broke into April smiles and tears, shower succeeding shower, with intervals of bright sunshine between, until at length all the clouds seemed to have wept themselves dry, and, changing to white-winged craft, scudded off to the interior valleys.

This period of waiting was a trying one to Miss Amy. Rob, intolerant of delay in the realization of a princely fortune, fumed and fretted over this untimely dispensation of Providence. It mattered not to him that farmers and stockmen were rejoicing, that empty water-courses were being replenished, wells and reservoirs were filling, and the thorough saturation of the ground was paving the way for a season of unusual prosperity. He was in a state of hot rebellion against every one and everything, and divided his time between a savage espionage of the sky from the shelter of the cottage roof, and frequent trips to the village to learn the latest forecasts of the weather bureau.

Incidentally, he ascertained the local mining-laws regulating the taking up of placer claims, and prepared several elaborate notices to post upon the

ground in the vicinity of his rich discovery, when he should be able to begin operations.

During one of these absences, Mr. Paul, passing the cottage, saw a fair face at the open door, wearing a look of patient sorrow which went to his heart.

"You are wearing your life out over that boy," he said brusquely, as he entered.

"Oh, no. But he has been so long away. He is changing so; this strange restlessness" —

"Is nothing but boy nature. Leave him alone, and he will find his balance," urged the young man, with a confidence he was far from feeling.

"I am afraid — oh, I am afraid" —

The girl turned again to the window, her fair head bowed as some delicate flower of the woods bends before a harsh blast, and the young man knew that tears were gathering in the wistful eyes.

With an impulsive movement he crossed the room, standing so close beside her that her bright head touched his breast as she lifted her face at his touch.

There was infinite tenderness in his low speech: —

"Amy, lay all your cares here. Let this be your shelter for evermore."

For an instant her head rested there. A great gladness coursed through the man's being. The strength of Samson was in his veins; he felt all-powerful to strive for, to defend, to cherish this fair young existence whom a blessed Providence had confided to his care. Like Samson, his strength was slain, and by a woman's hands. For the girl

slipped from his clasp, her pale face aflame, the keenest reproach in her eyes. Her voice rang out stern and cold: —

"Mr. Paul, remember! Remember — do you think I have forgotten? — that evening at your cabin — the black curtain?" she cried incoherently, for in her mind the incident of the portrait and the fantastic vision in which the curtain had played its part were strangely confused.

All youth and hope seemed to die out of the man's face at her words.

"You do well to remind me," he said. "The shadow of the black curtain falls between me and every joy in life."

Mystified by this speech, she was about to make reply, when Rob threw open the door, his face alight with joyful expectation.

"The storm is over. The bulletin has just come!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TREASURE-SEEKERS

Rob would have started across the range the next day after the rain ceased, had not Mr. Paul pointed out to him the folly of such an undertaking.

"The trail will be slippery as grease, and washed away in places. We must wait for it to drain off and dry. Besides, we shall have to pack over supplies, if we expect to make an extended stay. Moreover, you are forgetting one thing, Rob."

"What 's that?"

"We ought to hear from Norcross before going. He may not accept my indorsement."

The boy colored.

"It seems a perfect farce, the whole thing, with such prospects in sight. But of course Norcross does n't know."

"And would probably not accept 'prospects,' if he did know. These conservative rich men don't often trade on anything but certainties. The very suggestion of speculation is a bugbear to them."

"That 's all right. I don't ask him to take an interest. There are no shares for sale in this mine, Mr. Paul," returned the boy gayly. "I dare say you are right about wishing to hear from him, and it was awfully good of you to indorse it. But I 'll make that good to you. You 'll see!"

"Look here, Rob," said Mr. Paul sharply, "we 'd better have a clear understanding about this thing and done with it. I did n't put my name to that note because you had a rich gold mine over the range, nor even because you were a boy in serious trouble. I did it because you were your sister's brother."

This unexpected rejoinder gave Rob something to think about, and for a time he ceased to vaunt the glory of his prospective wealth. He even cheerfully joined the young man in ploughing and planting a hillside which the latter had cleared the preceding fall, and which he had decided to put into Kaffir corn, a new forage plant which he had been assured would yield treble the amount of fodder to be expected from barley. This hillside, being steep and gravelly, had quickly drained, and looked nice and mealy when the deep furrows had been harrowed over the seed.

A day came which dawned bright and clear, and Mr. Paul declared the trail in shape for traveling. Their preparations were few and simple. If Rob could have had his own way, he would have started out with a pack-train incumbered with all manner of baggage, tools, and supplies, procured on credit on the strength of the glittering prospects ahead; but the older man's prudent counsels prevailed.

"It 's a good principle to never spend your money before you get it, my boy," he sagely advised.

"But we 'll have to take picks and shovels and blankets and things," Rob insisted.

"As we can't each be picking and shoveling at

one and the same time, a tool apiece ought to be enough. It 's not more than eight miles to the river, and if you and I can't make the trip afoot, we 're not worthy to be counted as millionaires, Rob. My sorrel can carry a couple of hundred pounds' pack, and this will include our blankets and the few utensils we really need, as well as a week's provisions. When we have put in a week's steady work over there, we can plan more intelligently for the future."

Mr. Paul proved an expert packer. Upon the arms of the wooden pack-saddle he hung two great rawhide sacks, in which were stored the provisions. Bound along the animal's back, in parallel lines, were the tools required for the expedition, while above all rose a bale of bedding, surmounted by a roll of rubber blankets designed for protection in case of storms. Rob viewed the horse with a keen appreciation of his ludicrous aspect.

"It looks like a good deal more pack than horse!" he declared merrily.

He laughed good-naturedly when he saw Mr. Paul add to the pack a jointed rod of sumptuous workmanship, and carefully place in his pocket a case of elaborate trout-flies. Evidently the young man was a devoted disciple of the venerable Izaak.

"All right, if you want to take them. I don't think, myself, we 'll have much time or inclination for fishing!" remarked Rob, with lofty condescension.

"Amy might enjoy a mess of trout when we come back," said the young man quietly.

Rob was secretly amused at this very prosaic consideration for his little sister's material wants. He himself had much more ambitious plans for her, and it was natural that homely considerations such as these should be excluded from his more brilliant projects.

They started out single file, one leading and the other following the little sorrel. All things had taken on a new aspect since the refreshing downpour. The whole face of nature seemed to be newly washed. In the higher altitudes tender plantlets were already peeping through the moist earth, and shrubs that clothed the northern slopes were taking heart for another season's gracious endeavor, putting forth buds and blossoms.

Rob was a little depressed at the start. His sister had parted from him with a singularly sad countenance, considering the joyful nature of his mission.

"I wonder if Amy thinks I 've deceived her about this thing," he pondered. "Or more likely she has no faith in Mr. Paul's judgment as a mineral expert, and imagines we 're both deluded. Never mind. I 'll buy her a necklace of diamonds as big as pigeons' eggs, and she shall dress in silks and velvets all the rest of her life. She shall have everything heart can wish" —

But here his reflections suddenly broke off. He knew very well that there was one precious possession, the dearest treasure of Amy Judith's in the past, that no amount of money could either restore or compensate her for.

Yet it was not in boy nature to resist the joyous

influences of the day and hour. Rob laughed and chattered and sang, as happy as any bird that thrilled its spring song from rugged crag or leafy perch, as care-free as the flowerets, poised on slender stems, which nodded greeting as they passed. His strong young limbs bounded exultingly up the steep ascent, making frequent excursions from the trail in pursuit of fleeing squirrels and timorous rabbits, or to spy out the house plans of some nesting feathered pair.

His companion plodded more slowly after. Rob, looking behind him at a bend of the trail where horse and rider were brought into picturesque relief, sat down upon a rock and laughed uproariously.

"You make a gay old picture, you two!" he shouted. "If a stranger were to come along, he 'd put you down, sure, as relics of Joaquin Murietta's band!"

Mr. Paul smiled at the comparison, which was not at all far-fetched. In his worn corduroys, with cartridge-belt around his waist, his slouched hat with tattered crown and boots with flapping tops, the young man did not look unlike a border ruffian returning from some raid, to the success of which the overladen hampers attested.

"Count yourself in, Rob!" he retaliated, laughing.

"Oh, I 'm the chief ruffian and cut-throat of the band!" declared Rob shamelessly. "This gaping wound in my boot is the death-thrust of my dying victim. This gory cut on my face," dramatically raising his hand to where a chaparral thorn had left

an ugly scratch on his cheek, "was received in a hand-to-hand conflict with the gallant señor whose beautiful daughter I am carrying in a hamper to my mountain lair."

"And if my ear does not deceive me, the enemy is now after us in hot pursuit, heading off our escape, and intent upon rescuing the maiden and slaying her ruthless captor," cried Mr. Paul.

Listening, they heard the soft beat of hoofs on the trail above them. A moment later, a solitary figure, mounted on a burro, came in sight.

"One of Fowler's party, I vow!" exclaimed Rob. "Now he 'll want to know where we 're going and what we 're up to."

The traveler proved to be Sedgwick, who at once confirmed Rob's apprehensions.

"Going over to camp?" he cried heartily. "Fowler 'll be delighted to see you."

"Not so far this time, Mr. Sedgwick," returned Mr. Paul.

"Hunting!" exclaimed the man, in surprise. "I 'm afraid I can't give you much encouragement as to prospects. Game 's scarce up our way. The storm 's been tough in the hills, I can tell you. Regular cloudburst in a cañon near us, and it rounded up with a fall of snow that seems to have scared all the game out of the country. We have n't seen so much as a rabbit for a fortnight. Even the cattle have betaken themselves to unknown parts, and we can't pick up so much as a maverick."

Mr. Paul silently held up his fishing-rod.

"Aha!" cried Sedgwick, comprehending. "A

little in advance of the legal season, but never mind, I 'll not peach. On the whole, I congratulate you on not undertaking to make Las Cruces Cañon to-day. It 's a deuce of a trip. Do you know upon what weighty commission I 'm making this sixty-mile journey, risking life and limb, and hazarding my amiable temper?"

"Letters? Telegrams? Coffee given out?" ventured Rob.

"Oh, a few of those things by the way; thrown in incidentally, as it were," explained the young surveyor. "But they are not my main errand. Our chief has made up his mind that he can't survive any longer without a mince-pie. I can get letters, and papers, and coffee, and a few incidentals, if I choose, but if I return without a rich mince-pie, thick with plums, my doom is sealed. I 'll be bounced from the service."

"If I had a transitman in my employ who was n't capable of mustering a mince-pie across the range if I wanted it, I 'd fire him, too," returned Mr. Paul soberly. "Well, Rob, it 's slow work getting over this trail any day, and if we don't buckle down to business, that stream will either run dry or the fish will all swim out to sea. Adios, Sedgwick!"

"Adios, and good luck!" called out Sedgwick, waving his hat.

"You switched him finely off the track," observed Rob, as they resumed their climb. "Oh, won't he open his eyes when he sees us coming back in style, with a band of music, and pretty yellow metal enough to pave the whole trail and to spare!"

"We shall have to dispense with our coach and four until we get a better road built," returned Mr. Paul. "As our special private flying-ship is not in order, I see no way of returning but by the very prosaic route we are now taking."

"Oh, who cares about style, so long as we have such glorious prospects! I tell you, Mr. Paul, I 'm going to travel and learn things, and do things. One can have anything and be anything, in these days, if he has money to help him along. I 'll have the finest stables in America, and the best horses, and the nicest home for Amy, — books and pictures till you can't rest!"

The boy's exhilaration of spirit was so infectious that it communicated itself to Mr. Paul. He found himself entering into Rob's extravagant plans, suggesting and correcting them with a buoyant spirit. So absorbed were both in these dreams of the future that they crossed the summit and began to descend the steep slope, where the trail shot down in a series of nearly vertical dashes towards the river, before they realized that the promised land was actually in sight.

With one accord they suspended speech, and eagerly looked down to where a turbid current, charged with wash from the high mountains, hurried seaward.

A long, strange silence fell between them. At length the boy wheeled about, turning his back upon the rippling stream and smiling valley and burnished heights, and the two wild crags to which he had confided the guardianship of his treasure.

He grasped Mr. Paul's arm, looking into the young man's face in agonized appeal.

"Mr. Paul, what do you see?"

But Mr. Paul was looking blankly and incredulously in the direction Rob's eyes had been searching.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WINGED RICHES

"WHAT do I see? I see nothing, nothing at all," replied Mr. Paul.

"It can't be gone!" groaned the boy. "That mountain can't have been swept out of existence like a handful of sand."

"I 'm afraid that is precisely what has happened."

Rob collapsed in a heap on the ground. His companion watched him with sympathy blended with secret congratulation.

The red hill, for twenty years a landmark in that vicinity, was actually gone, vanished off the face of the earth, completely swept away by the torrent that had poured down the river-bed when all the countless little rills in the high mountains above had been transformed to boiling floods, and had rushed down to join the Santa Ysabel, seeking an outlet to the sea.

The river was quiet now, tranquilly flowing along its broad channel, mirroring the clear blue sky and wooded heights and rocky ledges upon its placid bosom; but a line of débris high on its banks, and clusters of brush far above their heads in the crotches of tall sycamores, told of the mighty current that had hurled itself against the red hill, itself no doubt the accumulation of milder freshets of bygone years,

rending and undermining and storming against it, until, with a great surge and plunge, the mountain had tottered and gone down, to be dissolved in the torrent and swept seaward by the foaming waters.

So stupendous a catastrophe was beyond all conceived forms of verbal expression. A vast fortune, wholly beyond their power to compute, carrying with it an immeasurable potentiality, had been stricken from their hold in the moment of attainment.

The two looked blankly into each other's faces, then Rob began to laugh, weakly, helplessly, foolishly, until the full absurdity of the situation possessed him, and he ended with a roar of merriment which echoed from the hills, and in which Mr. Paul joined him.

"That 's the true American humor, that laughs its way past obstacles and trials of every sort," said the older man at length, wiping his eyes. "I have n't the least doubt our forefathers laughed and jested and cracked jokes amid the terrors of Valley Forge."

"Valley Forge was n't a circumstance to this," asserted Rob ruefully. "Here I 've been lying awake nights, trying to calculate how much gold there was in that hill. If the piece I panned was a fair average test, it would have run about five thousand dollars to the ton. As nearly as I could make out, there was enough of it to pay off the national debt and have a few shekels left over. And here I have n't a whole pair of shoes to my name, nor means to get them!"

He wound up this dismal statement with a chuckle.

"It 's barely possible that the red hill may merely have been torn apart by the flood and floated downstream. In that case fragments of considerable size may be strewn like wreckage along the river-bank."

They started on foot down the river-bank, following the stream for several miles; but although the banks were everywhere liberally lined with brush and trees deposited by the flood, and now and then they picked up crumbling chunks of a soft reddish conglomerate, they could find no trace of the mountain of gold, which appeared to have vanished as mysteriously as it had been formed.

Tired, wet, and discouraged, Rob was the first to call a halt.

"It 's no use looking any further," he grumbled. "A great mass of earth and stone like that is n't going to set sail for the sea like a clipper-rigged yacht. It 's just my luck, anyhow, to lose it!"

"Look at it from another point of view, Rob," counseled the young man cheerfully. "You 've enjoyed a delightful dream, such as it falls to the lot of few men to rejoice in throughout their prosaic lifetimes. If it has come to nothing, bear in mind that it has cost you nothing, and you are the gainer by a very jolly memory."

"It 's queer how you contrive to turn everything into either fun or comfort," grumbled the boy. "I don't believe you 've ever known what it was to have a trouble or grief, Mr. Paul."

Could the lad have looked beneath the man's

smiling mask, or known with what a heavy heart he had set out upon this expedition; could he have learned the secret of the black curtain, a secret which he was one day to discover with horror and remorse, how bitterly he might have rued this careless speech.

Mr. Paul disregarded the remark.

"I 'm not sure but you 're a millionaire still, Rob," he said shrewdly. "I doubt if you've ever counted up your assets."

The boy eyed him indignantly. He was in no mood for further jesting on this sore subject.

"Oh, more than a mere millionaire, a multi-millionaire," the man went on seriously. "First, there 's your youth and strength and health. Worth a cool hundred thousand apiece at the lowest quotations. Then you have intelligence, a decent practical education, I take it, five keen senses, an unimpaired digestion, and a glorious appetite for the supper we 're going to have in a jiffy. That last item alone, more than one of the nabobs of the world would pay a full million to acquire, Rob."

This last suggestion went home to the boy, who became conscious of a hunger gnawing at his vitals which all the gold in the world could not at that moment have assuaged. It was a relief to be conceded the privilege of frying bacon over the blazing camp-fire that was kindled, and when Mr. Paul, casting a line, pulled several speckled beauties from the stream, the two enjoyed a feast which many men, rich in bonds and bank-stock, would have given half their fortune to have relished.

"Now, Rob, we 'll lay plans, for dessert," remarked Mr. Paul cheerily, when both had eaten their fill.

"I know — that note! It 's been hanging over me like a nightmare all day. But what can I do, Mr. Paul? I 've no standing, no money, no friends. If I were to get the best kind of a place, and the best wages, I could n't begin to earn more than a third of the amount during the next year."

"Be your own employer, Rob."

The boy was slow to comprehend.

"We have here, between us, and waiving the question of title for the present," Mr. Paul went on, "three hundred and twenty acres. Forty or fifty of these are already cleared for cultivation. We two, working faithfully, ought to be able to clear twenty or thirty more before the season for spring planting has gone by. Where the wood is heaviest, we might bring men in to cut it on shares and sell it for fuel. Then by judicious planting, with a fair season, we ought to get in a round sum."

"I 'm no farmer," said Rob frankly.

"Nor I!" declared Mr. Paul, with equal candor. "But there 's no trick about putting seed in the ground and gathering crops. Of course we shall have to get a span of good work-horses, and a gang plough, and other implements, as well as seed."

"Amy told me yesterday she had less than forty dollars left in bank," said Rob dejectedly.

"My own balance is n't very large, but between that and my credit I think we can pull through. Aside from what we should make by selling wood

and raising crops, there is my tunnel as an additional resource. It has n't been a brilliant success, but by putting in all our spare time there, we ought to develop more water, and I 've been offered a thousand dollars a miner's inch for everything I will sell. Oh, we 'll pull out somehow, never fear!"

"But it is n't fair to draw you into the thing this way, Mr. Paul. It is n't your loss or your disgrace."

The young man looked gravely at the boy, and Rob remembered his speech as they started out that morning. But all Mr. Paul said was: —

"We can adjust all that by and by, Rob. When we get this thing settled and out of the way, it will be time enough to begin to balance our mutual account."

The journey homeward was not as dreary as might have been imagined. In the midst of the heavy problems that beset them, and the stern tasks that lay before them, the comicality of the complete collapse of their dreams was constantly occurring to the two, upsetting their gravity and sending them into fresh paroxysms of merriment. Only at the foot of the trail, as they came in sight of the cottage in the tree, did Rob for a moment draw back.

"It 's no use, Mr. Paul, I can't face her. It 's only a day since I started over the sierra to bring back a fortune. And now I 've only a few speckled trout."

"Your sister is very fond of trout!" said Mr. Paul conservatively.

"Now you 're laughing at me again. I tell you I 'd rather be shot than tell her what 's happened. It 'll be an awful shock, Mr. Paul. Oh, I wish I 'd never told her, never started her hoping and expecting, only to be disappointed."

"Rob, you 're bringing back yourself. I think that 's a little better than your sister expected."

Mr. Paul had neither time nor occasion to explain this somewhat obscure remark, for in another instant there was a flutter of light garments along the path, and Amy Judith came in sight. She scarcely seemed to see Mr. Paul, acknowledging his presence with a little nod.

"What has happened, Rob?" she asked breathlessly. "Are you sick? Have you hurt yourself? I saw you coming down the mountain side. You were not to be back for at least a week."

At the sight of her distress a manly purpose replaced the weak, indecisive look on the boy's handsome face. He put his arm around the girl's waist and met her gaze unflinchingly.

"Yes, Amy, something has happened. Something awful. Sit down and I 'll tell you all about it."

Wonderingly she obeyed him and seated herself beside the trail, awaiting the sorrowful tidings that his face and voice premised.

"Can you nerve yourself for a terrible disappointment?"

"Tell me, Rob. I 'm no baby. Tell me at once!"

"Sister, my mountain of gold is all gone. Gone, to the last crumb. Washed downstream by last week's freshet."

"Thank Heaven!" cried Amy, in a voice that betokened great relief.

"Amy! Amy Judith!"

"I did n't want it in the least, Rob. I 'd much rather do without it," she insisted blithely.

"Well, I must say this is a queer deal!" growled Rob, much aggrieved. "That 's all you care for a fellow or a fellow's plans for you. I might have known it would turn out so. Trust a woman to have no sympathy for a fellow and to gloat over the downfall of his hopes!"

"Robert Judith," said the girl, with great dignity and impressiveness, "I don't believe it 's a good thing for any boy to have a fortune that he does n't earn. I 'd be gladder and prouder to share the smallest sum made by your own hands' labor than to live in a palace with money that came without effort. The day 'll come, Rob, when you 'll see it as I do. Let it be enough now that I want you for yourself, Rob."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE INTERVIEWER INTERVIEWED

MR. PAUL was guiding the plough one day, and Rob, following after, was dropping nicely cut potato eyes in the furrow, when this very prosaic labor met with an unexpected interruption. Across the moist field, daintily picking his way, came a slender young cyclist, who had left his wheel propped against a tree along the trail.

"Is Mr. Paul here?" he called out when still quite a distance away, evidently disinclined to soil his new russet leather gaiters unless reassured as to the object of his search.

"That 's supposed to be my name. Whoa, Dobbin! What can I do for you, sir?" returned Mr. Paul.

"Mr. Paul, I 'm really delighted to find you," declared the new-comer, with unction. "You see we 're short on a feature story for our Sunday edition, and I don't know what I 'd have done if I had n't chanced on you."

"I 'm afraid I don't quite grasp your meaning. Could n't you be a little more explicit?" said Mr. Paul, in a somewhat chill tone, holding fast to the lines while he viewed the visitor with a frown.

"Oh, pardon me. I supposed you would recognize me. I flatter myself there are not many people

in this valley who don't know me," drawing out a card and presenting it with a flourish. "There 's my name and calling, sir."

With an amused smile Mr. Paul examined the card, which was embellished with all the flourishes that adorn the country printer's art.

MR. ARTHUR BLODGETT,

MANAGER, EDITOR, AND SOLE PROPRIETOR

OF

The Daily and Weekly Comet.

"Ah! You 're a newspaper man, Mr. Blodgett."

"An editor and the proprietor of a daily journal, sir," remonstrated Mr. Blodgett haughtily, resenting the commonplace appellation.

"Oh! A sort of journalist-at-large!" Mr. Paul corrected himself.

"If you please to call it so, sir!" smiled Mr. Blodgett, propitiated by this more sounding title.

"And you want me to subscribe — advertise — write a poem, or what, for your paper, — the 'Daily Comet'?"

"The soliciting of subscriptions and advertisements is attended to by our business staff," explained the young man airily. "As for our poetry, sir, the 'Comet' is very particular, very particular indeed, about the quality of the verse it admits to

its columns. However, if you have a poem you would like to submit to the 'Comet,' I will see that it is read and passed upon impartially, and with the most discriminating literary taste."

"Very well, Mr. Blodgett, when I finish my new poem on Spring, I 'll call round. But you see just now I 'm rather busy at the plough, and my literary efforts are, so to speak, going by default," quoth Mr. Paul. "Is there anything else you would like? How are you off for editorials? I might give you something to-day on Potato Culture, and a few weeks from now I 'm likely to have a special inspiration on the subject of Cutworms."

"The editorials of the 'Comet' are always written by the staff, and they are confined strictly to political matters, Mr. Paul."

"And I 'm no politician, so you see I could be of no use to you in that line. As my Spring poem is n't ready, and I 'm no authority at all on fashions, and you won't have my sentiments on agricultural or entomological themes, I don't see how I 'm going to help out your Sunday issue."

"It was a feature story I spoke of" —

"Oh, yes, a feature story. And a Sunday edition without a feature story, in these days, is like a plough without a share."

"If you 'd just permit me to get in a word edgeways, Mr. Paul!"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Blodgett!" returned Mr. Paul amiably. "Let 's see. It 's a feature you 're after. Why don't you have a write-up of the pretty girls of the valley. That would be tremendously

popular, as well as mildly sensational. Or expatiate upon the sanitary advantages and picturesque features of the Vernal Hills. A newspaper can never say too much about the climate and advantages of the locality where it is published and upon which it must depend for support."

"Mr. Paul, I want you to furnish the feature."

"Wait until my spring planting 's done, Mr. Blodgett, I beg of you."

"But it won't take any time. You have a curtain. A black curtain?"

Mr. Paul could not deny the impeachment.

"About which there are really remarkable stories in circulation."

"I dare say."

"Jim Jones has told me about it."

Jim Jones was a roving character, hunter and naturalist in the mountains, and loafer and gambler in town, who enjoyed the reputation of possessing the most vivid imagination in the community.

"Ah! And what does Jones say?"

"He slept, or rather tried to sleep, in the room with it one night, and he declares it 's haunted. He says that while he lay watching it by the firelight, he saw a beautiful maiden emerge from it, weeping and wailing. Following her there came an ugly old savage, with his war-paint on and three feathers in his hair. And the girl crouched on the floor, and the Indian raised his tomahawk, and the girl gave a screech, and Jim Jones jumped to his feet, intending to rescue the maiden, when the savage and the girl rushed behind the curtain."

"That 's very hackneyed and threadbare. I thought Jones had more originality. I could give you a better story myself."

"If you only will!" Blodgett pulled out a bulky note-book. "Would you mind if I sit down on the plough, Mr. Paul?"

"Not at all. Make yourself perfectly at home. You can hold the lines, if you want to."

"I don't see how I could do that and manage my pencil."

"Never mind. Only, if the horses should take a fancy to start, I want it understood I can't be held accountable for the consequences. We 're planting potatoes, not journalists, in this furrow."

The editor and proprietor of the "Comet" was good enough to laugh at this pleasantry.

"Will you be kind enough to begin, Mr. Paul?"

"But I 'm not acquainted with either the political complexion of the 'Comet' nor its ethical postulates, Mr. Blodgett. I always like to oblige the press, but one wants to see everything in a newspaper homogeneous. How can I tell whether the story I relate will be in harmony with your paper's previous attitude on the great social questions of the hour?"

"I assure you, Mr. Paul, that has nothing to do with it. Give me just a nice, readable" —

"And then what kind of a story do you want?" persisted Mr. Paul.

"Really, sir, you own the curtain, and you ought to know" —

"But I don't. I assure you, on my honor, I

have n't the faintest idea. Would you prefer to have it located in this country or in India? Now that Theosophy is the rage among educated people, to which class I do not doubt that all the readers of the 'Comet' belong" —

"I don't care — a rap about Theosophy or India! It 's the curtain itself, the story of the curtain" —

"And would you prefer tragedy, comedy, or romance? You see, Mr. Blodgett, you know the temper of the 'Comet's' readers. Not being a newspaper man myself, — I beg your pardon, Mr. Blodgett, I should say not being an editor and proprietor, but only a 'prentice hand, — I 'd like the benefit of your advice before I begin to reel off my tale."

"I want the truth, just the plain truth, Mr. Paul. That ought n't to be so very difficult."

"Young man, there 's nothing more difficult or complex than the truth," returned his tormentor solemnly. "A piece of fiction, of more or less artistic merit, the merest tyro can evolve. But when it comes to dressing out the naked truth in readable shape, without altering a feature or an outline, it 's a stupendous task. Seriously, I 'd advise you against undertaking it. Better think it over. I 'll finish this furrow, and if you have a mind to join us at luncheon, which we shall take under that tree," indicating an oak at a discouraging distance over the freshly ploughed field, "I 'll consider your request."

Mr. Blodgett, editor and proprietor of the "Daily and Weekly Comet," arose from his not over comfortable seat, Mr. Paul whistled to his horses, and

the animals, refreshed by their short rest, moved briskly forward, pulling the plough after them. At the end of the field he turned and looked back.

The ploughed space was untenanted. Through the trees on the mesa below there appeared a flash of rapidly revolving wheels.

Mr. Blodgett had beaten a retreat. Whether this act was due to consideration for the new russet leathers, or whether he resented Mr. Paul's novel and wholly original method of being interviewed, the two he left behind were at a loss to decide.

CHAPTER XXX

CALAMITY

THAT year the Vernal Hills were the scene of one of those gallant struggles against heavy odds of which the world makes little account, and which yet develop the heroes of the earth. Day after day Rob, unused to severe physical exertion, rose with the dawn and labored for long, weary hours, until the setting sun brought a grateful relief to his aching limbs. Day after day a man of gentle breeding made willing sacrifice of his time and strength, joining in the humblest toil, to lend aid and companionship to the boy so sorely worsted in the world's conflict, who was battling his way back to honor and self-respect. All the while a delicate woman loyally shared their burdens and privations, bringing cheer and grace into their homely lives.

"We shall just about pull out, Rob," said Mr. Paul in late July, as they sat about their evening meal. Amy Judith had insisted that during this season of mutual endeavor he should resign the cares of his bachelor household and share their own cosy meals.

The most difficult relation in the world for a man and woman to sustain is that of friendly, daily intercourse, when on either side there is a consciousness that the depths of existence have been

stirred by the other's touch. Although this man and woman each possessed a gentility too fine and true to permit the remembrance of this unspoken drama to embarrass their association, there were unguarded moments when a thoughtless speech or unbidden thought thrilled the heart of one or caused sharp pain to the other. The presence of Rob, with a boy's blunt perceptions and youth's impetuous interests, went far to relieve the awkwardness of their intercourse, and they were accustomed to direct conversation in the channels which most interested him.

"I was afraid — you know that wretched field of beans, and the time and money it cost!" said Rob. Eight months of stern effort had wrought a notable change in the boy. His voice had become deep and manly, and there was a steadfastness in his eye that told of a spirit grown strong in adversity.

"That shows the beauty of always planning to have a margin," declared Mr. Paul. "With the money already collected on the wood and water account, and the balance we shall have on the hay when it is delivered to Barry, and the hundred or so dollars we ought to be able to clear on the corn, we shall fall less than a thousand dollars short on the note. By putting more men to work this fall on the oak wood in the west gulch and ourselves joining them on the hauling, we ought to be able to make up the rest by spring."

"Another good year would clear up all our local bills and put us ahead," said Rob, with animation.

"Another year you shall not work as hard, if I

can prevent it," cried Amy impulsively. "It may not hurt you, Rob, but it is wearing out Mr. Paul."

She broke off short, avoiding the look that her sympathetic speech had kindled in his face, but although he put in a cheerful disclaimer, as they rose from the table she did not fail to note his stiff and weary movements, telling of sore exhaustion and stiffened muscles. Rob, on the other hand, moved about as easily as any young athlete who had just pulled his oar with a college crew.

"The only outstanding account that troubles me is our grocery bill," remarked Mr. Paul. "I dislike to owe a grocer. There 's something that savors of disrepute in it."

"Would you like to see the account?" asked Amy.

While both men puzzled over her laughing look, she went to her desk, and taking out a homely little brown book, laid it in Mr. Paul's hand and stood looking down upon him, a dainty vision of grace and womanly sweetness in her simple lawn gown and with a single Castilian rose in her bosom. Mr. Paul's tired eyes lingered upon her face, where the joy of an innocent mystery for the moment lent brilliancy to her delicate features.

"Look in the book!" she commanded.

He did as he was bid. Page after page was filled with humdrum entries of various food-stuffs, sugar, flour, coffee, tea, rice, — all of the items small. Even a cursory glance showed their character.

"It is a very economical account. The total is n't anything like what I expected. But what is this? The account is balanced."

"Turn to the back!" said the girl.

He found a series of credits. "Berries" and "eggs" were the most frequent items, although now and then there was an entry showing that surplus garden-stuff had been marketed to advantage.

"Bravely done, Miss Amy!" he said simply. "But I know of a third member of this firm who shall not work as hard another year."

She flushed, and busied herself about the dishes, a task in which both men hastened to join her.

"It 's a burning shame, Amy! If my mountain of gold had n't gone up — or rather down — the flume, you 'd have never known what it was to have another duty or care."

"Better to wear out than rust out, Rob. Honestly, am I not twice the woman I was when I left the city three years ago?"

She stood up, straight and lithe, before him, her graceful figure showing rounded outlines through her thin summer dress, a healthy glow in her cheek, but best of all a tranquil spirit and sweet patience displacing the olden unrest.

"I don't know about the stature, Amy. In all other ways, yes," said her brother, beginning in good-natured sarcasm, but ending seriously, as he realized the picture of perfect and gracious womanhood that she presented.

"I have health, congenial occupation, and happiness; perfect happiness," she added firmly, meeting Mr. Paul's eye.

They went out that night to look upon the splendid spectacle presented by the fires that raged along

the mountains, a common incident of summer in the Vernal Hills, but presenting, this season, a scene of more than usual magnificence. The tallest peaks were literally garlanded with flame, and now and then a pine-tree, standing like a lone sentinel upon some rocky outpost with gaunt arms outstretched, robed itself in a garment of flame and sent a black volume of smoke into the blue firmament, blotting out the glittering stars.

"There is something frightful in the resistless sweep of these fires," said Amy, shivering with sudden fright in the tropical atmosphere, as she watched the work of the flames and listened to their distant roar. "One could almost believe the fire-fiend a living creature, pouncing with relentless fury upon his victims. He has been lying still and hidden in that gulch all day, and now see how he has suddenly sprung upon his victim, — that pretty oak grove that we have often noted near the summit. You can almost hear the trees groan and struggle in his clutch. I hope he won't get down here."

"Not the slightest danger in the world," Mr. Paul reassured her. "At this season of the year all the winds are trades, blowing straight from the sea. Those steep gulches act like so many chimneys, and the range of such fires is always upward."

It was an east wind, a little, hot, desert breeze, that one day a week later grew tired of playing with the scorched sands of the Mojave desert, and determined to bathe its tired wings in the cool spray of the great Pacific. So with many graceful sallies and retreats, it darted up the wooded slopes of the

mother mountains, that stately sierra that frowns darkly over those barren wastes, and laughingly peered over its fretted summit. The mountain valleys lay sweltering in the heat of the August sun, with here and there a tiny ranch, tucked in a nook of the hills, where lonely men smoked and drank, read or played cards, during the long, hot hours of the day, sometimes sallying forth at nightfall to look after their herds. With a glad surge and flutter, the little desert wind flung itself across this desolate waste, poising with glad, outstretched wings on the crest of the Vernal Hills, and quaffing deep draughts of the cool air that floated up from the peaceful blue waters spread out below. Its enemy, the trade wind, was sleeping, and the visitor grew strong and mirthful as he realized that in all that wide domain he might enjoy full sway. Near at hand the mountain sides and gulches were curiously blackened, and all the ground was covered with a fine dust as gray as the sands of the desert. He breathed gently upon this gray coating, and the tiny atoms rose in the air, giving a glimpse of something bright and glowing beneath. He blew vigorously, and bright sparks rose, and little curling flames began to play, and fiery cinders flew. These the roysterer gathered eagerly in his embrace, hurrying them seaward, strewing them through the dry underbrush in the green cañons below, where new sparks rose and new flames were kindled, joining to form a furious, frolicking band, a flaming battalion sweeping down upon the little ranch homes nestling in the coverts of the hills, and advancing upon the fruitful orchards of the valley.

Amy Judith was busily engaged that morning in training a willful climbing-rose upon a trellis which it had obstinately refused to follow. Her brother and Mr. Paul were gathering corn in a distant field, and she had gone out with hammer and tacks to bind the refractory shoots in place. So deeply absorbed in her work was she that she only idly wondered when a breath of air hot as a blast from a fiery furnace touched her cheek. The mountain fires had subsided and gradually died out days before, and now the hot September weather was at hand. A few weeks more and the season's rush and strain would be over, and Rob, with old scores cleared away and a redeemed name, would have before him an open path to a noble manhood.

Amy's heart swelled with joy and thankfulness. To be secure, safe and secure once more, was all she, who had once expected so much, now asked of life. Then all at once she heard a voice crying out her name, in agonized appeal.

"Oh, what is the matter?" she exclaimed, for Mr. Paul was running towards her, an expression of fright and horror on his face.

"The fire!" he shouted. "Can't you see it is upon us?"

Amy looked to the west, where a line of flame and smoke followed the gulch which half encircled the bit of mesa on which the cottage stood. She turned to the east. Black billows of smoke, rising from the thick growth of oaks and chaparral, which extended from the foothills far down into the valley, told that all escape was cut off in that direction.

CHAPTER XXXI

A COWARD MEETS HIS DESERTS

"THERE 's only one place that offers a possible chance for safety. My cabin!" cried Mr. Paul. "Yours is sure to go. Don't you see, it 's coming straight this way, — a tempest of flame! There is n't a chance of reaching the valley. For God's sake, come! Don't lose a moment!"

"Where is Rob?" asked Amy.

"Gone with the wood-cutters to fight it. They are taking every possible precaution, — wet cloths over their mouths, their clothes drenched. They soaked their felt hats in water. The men are used to it."

Amy Judith ran up into her little home, snatched up a few needful articles, and thrust into her breast a single memento of her dead mother, then, with a sigh and a quick backward glance, said her last farewell to the small cottage about whose brief existence so many dear memories clustered, and which hung, in its leafy bower, all unconscious of its hastening doom.

Fast as her light feet flew down the shadowed path that led to Mr. Paul's cabin, she could with difficulty keep pace with the man by her side, who held fast to her hand, half leading, half dragging her down the steep descent. The air was full of

flying cinders, and charred leaves, mere floating flakes of ash, fell in a shower about them. The smoke was suffocating, and little curling tongues of heat seemed to play about their faces.

"Quick! There is a short cut through here!"

He helped her across the dry and stony bed of Hidden Creek, and through a matted undergrowth that seemed to fade and shrivel in the scorching atmosphere even as they passed. Once Amy was about to remonstrate with her guide for the needless impetus of this flight, when the fire was still in another gulch and a full half mile away, but she reflected, in time, that every moment of delay was keeping him from lending aid to others who might be in greater need of succor. On the threshold of the cabin she halted, pale, but smiling bravely.

"Don't come any further with me, Mr. Paul. I am as safe now as you can make me."

"Hurry into the house. Don't stop!" he urged.

"But I am keeping you needlessly. You have done all you can for me," she cheerfully insisted. "I would not hold you back for the world. Of course I shall be a little afraid until I know that all danger is past, but I should be just as timid if you were here. Go. Do go!"

"There is a good clearing around the cabin. It cannot overtake us here," he cried rejoicingly, as he closed the door and sank into a chair.

"Us!" she repeated incredulously, certain that she had misunderstood him. Then, in quick apology:

"You are exhausted. Of course you must take a moment's rest before you join the men."

He looked up at her, and she saw that his face was drawn with lines like those of physical pain.

"I cannot. I dare not face it," he said.

For the first time she divined that the strange excitement and agitation which she had attributed to his anxiety to get her to a place of safety had been in part due to his own personal fear, and in the same instant, like many another woman, she realized the awful truth that this man, whom she loved with all her heart and soul, was unworthy of her regard, a coward and deserter in time of danger. It mattered not what other ties barred the way to their union, what weaknesses he possessed to claim her contempt rather than the rightful homage a woman should render the man she loves, no matter what the character of the mystery that invested his life, her heart had gone out to him beyond recall.

Amy Judith shrank from this knowledge as she would have shrunk from any impure thought or base impulse that might have found lodgment in her mind. All the honor and truth and faith of her nature recoiled from the discovery, and demanded that she should cast out this unworthy affection. At the same time, and in spite of his present craven attitude, his own acts pleaded for him. She could not help recalling his many deeds of kindness, the loyal and unselfish aid he had rendered her and an erring boy who had no claim upon him save the claim of the helpless and unfortunate. But he had basely abandoned his post of duty. He was shrinking from an ordeal that a seventeen-year-old boy was bravely facing. He had made open confession

of his own weakness. He had been recreant to his manhood. Ah, how she wished that she might hate and despise him as he deserved!

A sudden glare illuminated the room. The smouldering embers at the head of Hidden Creek had been fanned into new life, and finding fresh food in the luxurious growth along the stream bed, the flames were madly charging down the gulch. The fire was upon them, with a deafening rush and roar, dazzling in its splendor, terrifying in its majesty.

She went to the window and looked out, finding relief from her own battling emotions in witnessing this furious onslaught of the fire-fiend. In the semi-twilight of the gulch the scene was one of unearthly brilliancy. A sheet of flame seemed to spread from hill to hill, licking up the thick underbrush with slap of its giant tongue. Now and then a fiery thread would glide like a serpent up a snarl of climbing vines that wreathed some tall tree, writhing and hissing as it reached the canopy of foliage above, and a little later, with a crash and shower of sparks, the forest giant would fall.

At one time the fire seemed to threaten the cabin, and she thankfully remembered a coil of hose attached to a hydrant beside the door, which could be resorted to in case of need; but after a series of dazzling feints and sallies, the wily foe withdrew and sped on its way to the valley, leaving a blackened path behind, and she knew that the peril had gone by.

Smoke had penetrated the cabin through a hun-

dred chinks and crevices, and its atmosphere was stifling. Her eyes were stinging, her throat was dry, and a scorching breath seemed to have filled her lungs. She groped her way to the door and flung it open, letting in the fresh evening air.

All this time Mr. Paul had been sitting with his face in his hands. He gave a groan of relief and staggered to his feet, and he was wan and haggard as a man who had passed through some mortal illness.

Amy constrained herself to meet his eyes, and he encountered the expression a man most dreads to see on a woman's face,— a look of contempt that passed all speech.

It was the girl's turn to cover her face, with a low cry: —

"Oh, Mr. Paul, Mr. Paul! I did not mean that you should see."

A look of stern resentment succeeded the amazement in Mr. Paul's countenance.

"I hoped you had sufficient regard — or at least sufficient confidence in me" — he began.

"That is just it. If I had n't liked you! We were such good comrades, such loyal friends! It is a terrible thing to have a friendship, a beautiful friendship, slain!"

"Don't talk of friendships, Amy."

The young man was evidently laboring under severe restraint. He walked up and down the apartment, his lips tightly compressed, his whole expression one of intense indignation and resentment.

"No, it is all gone by," said the girl sadly. "Yet it is because I so esteemed you yesterday that I have courage to speak now. Granted that you are subject to some mortifying, uncontrollable, perhaps inherited weakness, Mr. Paul, — we all have our frailties and our weaknesses, but they are given us to control, not to make weak surrender to."

Mr. Paul stopped before her, looking down upon her with a strange smile, and for an instant it seemed as if he were about to speak, but her next words silenced him. For she went on, steadfast in her purpose, in a dreary little monotone: —

"The duty that is appointed is the one that comes to our hand, and we owe it to our manhood and our womanhood to face it without flinching or counting the cost. But you — you yielded without resistance; you did not make the slightest effort to overcome yourself and to rise to the demands of the hour and of your manhood."

Once again it seemed as if he were about to speak, and she waited, half hoping that his words might explain his strange moral collapse, half dreading lest they confirm it in its worst aspect. She resumed, speaking wearily, sadly, hopelessly: —

"I have so honored you for your goodness to Rob. Your past was nothing to me. I have never asked, I do not ask you, to explain the mystery of the black curtain. The careless gossip of the country is nothing to me. That is, no doubt, nothing but some harmless caprice with little significance, a mere shield behind which you screen from curious gaze or profane touch some article or furnishings

dear to you through past association. But this is different. This I have seen with my own eyes; it is unanswerable. Men have gone into battle shrinking in every limb, trembling at the sound of cannon; and they have come out heroes. I would rather have seen you dead at my feet, than to have known you a" —

She did not finish the sentence. Something in the face of the man standing so grave and silent before her arrested her words.

"A coward."

In dignity and calmness he finished the speech for her, and he seemed to grow in stature as he pronounced the word, so immeasurably above and beyond its reach did he seem.

To a casual observer, the woman who had framed this cruel sentence might at the moment have seemed to be in greater need of pity than the man upon whom it fell. For she buried her face in her hands as he spoke, and her cheeks burned with shame.

CHAPTER XXXII

HEROISM

WHEN the fire tore like a cyclone down the hills that afternoon, interrupting Mr. Paul and Rob at their pleasant labor, it was at the boy's suggestion that Mr. Paul hastened down to the mesa to warn his sister and see that she found a place of safety. To the lad there was exhilaration in the threatening danger, and although he had patiently undertaken his share of the season's cares, he rejoiced in this escape from the monotony of daily routine, and the chance to join in a hand-to-hand conflict with the fiery monster which was menacing his home.

The wood-cutters, scenting danger with the first stir of the east wind, had abandoned their work, and armed with axe and mattocks, were hurrying across to make a clearing in the path of the advancing foe.

"There comes McCabe and his boys!" one cried, pointing to some black figures climbing the hillside above a little farm located at the mouth of the cañon below.

"And yon 's a team coming up from town!" said the other, pointing to a cloud of dust whirling along the highway. "We 'll have help. They all know what this means."

A dozen years before, another east wind, frolick-

ing over the hills from the desert, had brought a fierce fire down upon the valley, more thickly wooded then than now, and many homes had been destroyed and orchards and vineyards despoiled before its progress had been checked.

A host of earnest workers were soon on the scene, but before they could reach it the fire had spread in all directions, and the belt of country to be covered was wide. They succeeded in stopping its spread in one place, only to find that it had escaped them in another, but they battled on undaunted, as only men can fight who struggle for the preservation of their homes. They grubbed at the roots of the tough chaparral, and tore out the lighter growths of underbrush with their naked hands, flinging it in the maw of the advancing demon. Now and then, when a sufficient clearance had been made, they burned away small strips of ground, piled high with the uprooted brush, that the flames might find nothing to feed upon when they reached the spot.

The greatest menace to the workers and the fire's chief allies were the great trees, whose branches, like flaming banners, served to carry the enemy's victory into new territory. At one point, where the flames were well under control, a tall, dead sycamore was discovered aflame. The men undertook to fell it with axes, but a shower of burning brands forced them to desist.

"If we could get a rope through the fork of them limbs, twenty feet from the ground, we 'd bring her down. Then we 'd be masters of the situation," said McCabe, who by virtue of his superior force

and decision had been conceded the leadership. "If she falls now, she 'll go the wrong way and undo everything."

They tried to cast one end of a long rope over the tree, but the wind tossed it about, and the flaming branches, like so many waving arms, beat it back, while the fire gained furious headway.

"It 's as much as a man's life is worth to climb her," remarked one old man. "I 'd tackle her, but the rheumatics in my knees makes me that clumsy I 'm afeard I could n't make it."

Rob, who, with the great dog Hercules by his side, had been one of the most energetic and efficient in the ranks, came up in season to hear this conversation and to recognize the need.

"I 'll take it up. I 'm the lightest," he cried. "Give me a hand, McCabe!"

Seizing the coil of rope, and bracing himself against McCabe's stout shoulder, he succeeded in mounting the slippery trunk to where a broken limb afforded him a foothold. From this point the ascent was comparatively easy, save for the blinding shower of fire that greeted his every upward glance.

"That boy has grit. I like him," was McCabe's comment, as they watched him.

Rob reached his goal in safety, although his hands were bruised and burned, and on his cheek and neck a falling brand seared deeply, causing agonizing pain. Bracing himself in the crotch of two limbs, he flung the rope through the fork of the limbs above. The shout that went up from below was better than ointment for his smarting wounds,

and he waved a triumphant greeting and cheered lustily over the success of his mission.

No one knew exactly how it happened. Self-forgetful in his boyish rejoicing, he may have for the instant loosed his hold; a foot may have slipped as he began his perilous descent; the hands that grasped the rope may have unconsciously laid weight upon it; or it may be the old tree was so rotten at the roots that the boy's weight overbalanced the slender hold it had upon the earth.

Still blazing, and with twinkling branches outspread like a great flaming candelabra, it tottered and went down. Down into a blazing line of brush and chaparral, scattering ashes like whirlwinds in all the air around, while the smoke rose like a pall, the old tree lay prone in its death agony, a helpless, uncouth shape, lifting gaunt and blackened arms as if in mute appeal. But where was the lad who had but the moment before cried out exultingly at its conquest?

Hercules was barking furiously about the smouldering chaparral, where the tree pressed heavily upon it.

"Where is he?"

"Don't you see where the dog is barking, under that branch there? Lend a hand, boys!" Raise the heavy limb that binds him down in that fiery furnace. Lift him out tenderly, carefully! Is he quite dead? Oh, the foolhardiness of it! Why had they let him undertake so desperate a venture? Better that a few fields should have been burned, a few buildings destroyed, than that this young life

should be sacrificed! Bring water, and wipe away the grime and blood from his pale face. Straighten the limp limbs and fold the bruised hands where cruel burns have eaten deep into the flesh.

Suddenly McCabe, kneeling beside the boy, and directing these tender offices, sprang to his feet.

"His heart 's beating! Send Jim to the village for a doctor. Two of you stay and watch the fire. The wind 's gone down, and unless it starts up again, the danger 's past."

Constructing a simple litter of willow poles, lined with fragrant chemisal, they carried him down to Mr. Paul's cabin, crossing the blackened cornfield where the lad had so patiently toiled that summer, with honor and liberty his stake, and where here and there charred stalks, like so many ineffectual prayer plumes, drooped their tasseled heads.

The movement through the cool night air restored him to consciousness, and with consciousness came pain.

Amy Judith heard the sound of voices, and peering out into the twilight, saw the shadowy procession and hurried out to meet it. Ashes, gray as early snow, covered the ground, which was still hot beneath her feet.

The men's faces were blackened with smoke and sweat, but they were heroes, every one, the girl felt, with a thrill of sympathy that steeled her heart against her own small woes. But what was the burden they carried?

"Rob!"

He tried to rise on his elbow with a reassuring speech.

"I 'm all right, Amy. Don't worry! There 's no occasion" — he protested, and immediately proceeded to give tangible proof of his assertion by fainting away.

"He got his arm rather badly mangled and his back hurt by the falling of a tree; and he 's got some ugly burns," explained McCabe.

Mr. Paul's strong arms lifted the injured boy and carried him to his own bed, in an alcove adjoining the large living-room. It was Mr. Paul's clear head and ready wit which brought order out of chaos, and applied healing lotions to the deep burns, with a touch tender as a woman's. And when everything had been done that the resources of the mountain home would permit, he it was who took up his watch by Rob's bedside, insisting upon sharing his care with the distracted girl, ministering to the sufferer's every want, anticipating every demand.

The men had been gone but a short time when there came a knock at the door, which Mr. Paul hastened to answer. He found McCabe and another man there, the bearers of an important communication, which, curtly ignoring the young man, they insisted upon delivering to Miss Judith in person.

Amy reluctantly left her post and presented herself before them, looking so frail and slight that the men's hats were doffed in an instant, and they felt a chivalrous joy in the message they brought.

"We just came to tell you — I thought maybe you 'd like to know" — began McCabe, his honest

face beaming, "that we thought we 'd take a look around when we were on the way down, to sort o' make note of the mischief done, like the appraisers the underwriters send out when a house or barn burns down. And if you 'll believe me, ma'am, that darned little paper house is hanging there in its tree, big as life an' pert as all creation."

"The fire must have taken a turn there. How strange!" was Amy's musing comment.

"That 's just what it did n't do, ma'am," said McCabe. "It made a clean sweep down to Jake Wright's stubble-field, where they stopped it by ploughing fresh furrows. It took everything on the way, mowed down big live-oaks like so many mustard stalks and charred the very boulders. But there stands that oak and that little house in it, only scorched a mite on one side where a vine clumb up the tree. Hen-house 's gone, an' the big oak on the east side 's a heap of ashes, but that tinder-box had the queerest luck. Must be it 's got some sort of fireproof dressing over it. But here comes the doctor. If you don't mind, I 'll just wait and see what he has to say. Everybody down our way 'll be wanting to hear," added McCabe.

The old physician shook his head doubtfully when he saw the extent of the burns. Rob was growing feverish, and had relapsed into unconsciousness, moaning with pain and muttering about the fire and the tree, sometimes feebly summoning Hercules to his aid, and again begging the men to lift the weight that pinned him down.

"His chances are slim," the doctor said at length,

with cruel frankness. "He was evidently in an exhausted condition when the injuries were sustained. That great patch on his neck and cheek, where the skin is burned away, is enough to kill a strong man. Nature's recuperative forces are limited. To be sure, he has youth in his favor, but I fear all we can do is to relieve his sufferings as far as we can."

Amy Judith, overpowered with sudden faintness, dropped on her knees beside the bed where the poor sufferer was now babbling of water, cool, flowing water, and begging to have his face and hands laved in it. The doctor looked pitifully upon her, and McCabe, who had followed to the threshold, unable to bear the sight, tiptoed clumsily away. But Mr. Paul touched the doctor lightly on his arm.

"A few words with you, doctor, if you please. Will you be kind enough to come this way?"

The doctor followed, marveling at his unconcerned voice and manner. McCabe was standing in the large room, the picture of helpless misery.

"Have you ever tried skin-grafting, doctor?" Mr. Paul asked, still in the same careless voice.

"Once, years ago, when the experiment was new."

"Was it a success?"

"Decidedly."

"What would its effect be in this case?"

"The boy's salvation, if done under the right conditions. But it would be necessary to engraft from a healthy, vigorous person. You never find any one willing to volunteer in such cases except

members of the patient's family. As I understand it, young Judith has no relative but that delicate girl. I 'll tell you honestly, Mr. Paul, I would n't dare undertake it, if she were willing. She is n't strong enough. I could n't forecast the result."

"How will this do?"

Mr. Paul rolled back the sleeve from his left arm, displaying the muscles of an athlete, covered with a skin fair and free from blemish as a girl's. The doctor's eyes sparkled.

"Good!" he cried. "But we must lose no time. Come on, McCabe! I want your help."

"By the Lord, you 'll have it in more ways than one!" responded McCabe, slowly gathering the meaning of this demonstration. "It 's I that will be proud, doctor, to have a drop of my blood running in that brave lad's veins."

Amy Judith did not understand why she was so summarily banished from the room where the young sufferer lay, but she obediently followed the doctor's directions, making ready warm water and preparing fresh bandages, all unconscious of the scene that was transpiring behind the drawn portière.

Mr. Paul stood without flinching while the doctor removed patch after patch of skin, until his arm was dripping blood and checked from wrist to shoulder. When it came McCabe's turn, at the first prick of the knife, the strong man turned white, and dropped, half fainting, into the nearest chair.

"Ow! It 's like being vaccinated, doctor; I never could stand it."

"I really think we can dispense with your epider-

mis, McCabe. Mr. Paul has contributed enough," said the doctor, looking with pride upon the particles of white skin inlaid upon the angry surface of his patient's wound, and commencing to bandage it skillfully.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MR. PAUL BEHIND THE BLACK CURTAIN

"I WANT to have a talk with you both about my — affairs," said Rob, some days later, as he lay back in a reclining-chair, fully dressed, but still swathed in bandages, in the pleasant apartment that had been allotted him.

The siege of suffering through which he had passed had left Rob pale and wasted, but all danger from any shock to the system resulting from the extensive surface of skin burned over was past, and the mangled arm was now the most serious injury, requiring good care and frequent dressing. The hurt to the spine had been trifling, and while he would probably have a weak back for a year or more to come, there was no reason why it should not in time become strong and sound again.

"Don't try to talk now. Try not to think!" said his sister impulsively.

"But I must. I can't help thinking, and I must have it out now and here. Our crops — all we depended upon — are gone. A clean sweep, Mr. Paul?"

"A clean sweep, with the exception of the hay already stored at Barry's," replied Mr. Paul gravely.

"If it were any other man but Norcross, we might

pay over the little we have, and get the time extended. But the old captain always prides himself on being a man of his word."

"Yes, it would be useless to try to temporize with Norcross."

"I 've done my best, and failed." The lad's face quivered. Amy buried her face in the coverlet beside him. "But" — Rob rallied — "you 've done more than your best, — you and Amy. You 've been the kindest friends a boy ever had. You 've done more than you had any right to do, and it 's been no use. Now what I want to say is this: You shan't be cumbered by me any longer. Next week I 'll be able to travel, and I 'll go to San Francisco and give myself up and take my sentence. Don't cry, Amy!"

For she was sobbing violently beside him.

Rob went on speaking with feverish haste.

"It 's the right thing to do. It 's what I ought to have done in the first place. I see it now. But I was so young and the chance of liberty was tempting."

There was a break in his voice. Amy raised her face, streaming with tears, and kissed the maimed arm and bandaged hand. Rob tried to speak cheerfully.

"I 'll promise you I 'll keep straight all the time I 'm in there, Amy. And I 'm young yet, and the time won't be long. I 'll earn every credit there is, and shorten the time all I can. And I 'll keep straight when I come out. I 'll come back to you, Amy, then, if you 're not ashamed to have me, and

I 'll work my way up again, honestly and squarely, so help me God!"

There was a hush in the room, disturbed only by Amy's sobs, breaking forth again in uncontrollable anguish.

Mr. Paul had hitherto listened in silence and with the grave expression growing on his face. He bent down now, and took Rob's unhurt hand in his.

"So help me God, Robert Judith," he said solemnly, "you shall never step inside prison walls."

The boy feebly shook his head. Amy raised her head, looking up reproachfully through her tears, as if she would upbraid Mr. Paul for holding forth a hope so impossible of realization.

"I have one resource, Rob, which we have all been forgetting, — my fairy purse. I think there are a few coins left. I shall draw upon it now. Norcross shall be paid promptly on the day when the note falls due."

He tried to speak lightly, but there was still such solemnity in his voice that his two hearers were strangely moved. Rob's eyes shone with new hope and courage.

"Are you sure you can — spare it, Mr. Paul?"

"Yes. It is merely an investment, Rob. If I should try to keep the coins, they might only be lost to me in the end. This way I make sure of them, you see. — Amy, may I have a word with you?"

While Rob lay idly in his chair, with bright visions of a free future flitting past his closed eyes, Mr. Paul led her to the outer room, through whose

broad windows they could see the birds flitting to and fro, laying new plans for home-building.

Amy was the first to speak.

"Mr. Paul, will you forget — what I said — that day? I was half wild with anxiety for Rob. I did not realize what I was saying. Can we not be friends again?" putting out a timid little hand.

"I do not want your friendship, nor even your loyal comradeship. Friendship is not for you and me, Amy. Some day I had meant to ask you once again for a more precious gift, but that is all gone by. Trust is the very foundation-stone of all true affection. When doubt undermines it, the whole structure goes down."

Had she obeyed the impulse of her heart and, putting her arms around his neck and resting her head upon his breast, whispered her penitence and her trust, she would have had cause to rejoice all the rest of her life, and been spared much bitter regret. That she made no sign of the love and compassion and sorrow that surged within her was due in part to her own shy willfulness, in part to a haunting recollection of the day when she had fallen from the bluff and been brought to his cabin, and the half confidence that he had made her then.

A singular transformation appeared to come over this man whom she had known so long and intimately. Instead of the cheerful, practical-minded young ranchman who had quibbled with her over land titles, thrust good-natured assistance upon her, and shown himself her stanch friend and wise adviser in time of trouble, Mr. Paul had suddenly

retreated to an immeasurable distance. His voice, low and deep, seemed merely to echo emotions that belonged to some remote past. He went on, in the same measured, abstract tone.

"You have told me some bitter truths, little woman, but I want to assure you now that should the time ever come when you feel disposed to reproach yourself for them, I sincerely thank you for your frank and fearless speech. A man has no right to make weak surrender to the inevitable. It is better to fight honorably to the bitter end, and to go down in battle with one's face to the foe, than to weakly capitulate and cry for quarter, as I have done. To-day I shall lift the black curtain. There is blessing even in loss, for had you loved me, this pall might have forever overhung my life. When I put the curtain in place I did not foresee that it was destined to take such a hold upon the imagination of the countryside. It was kind of you to view the matter so sensibly. I assure you that you are correct in supposing it to be merely a harmless caprice of mine; yet its lifting will not be without significance to me."

He crossed the room and laid his hand upon the drapery's sombre folds. The girl, watching his sober face, felt a chill foreboding as the heavy cloth swayed beneath his touch.

The next instant the black curtain parted, and when it fell again in place, Mr. Paul had disappeared behind it.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ROB RECEIVES A COMMISSION

During the days that elapsed before Rob's condition would permit of his removal, he and his sister saw little of their host, who remained for the most part in strict and mysterious seclusion behind the black curtain.

When the demands of their simple way of life brought them in contact, or when his solicitude for the injured boy caused him to join them, although he made a manifest effort to direct conversation in light channels and to encourage and stimulate Rob, and often entertained his guests charmingly with anecdote and reminiscence, always impersonal in character, he relapsed by turns into fits of singular abstraction, and day by day the drawn and haggard look deepened on his face.

Strive as she might to fill her mind with cheerful thoughts and to banish morbid speculation, Amy Judith was painfully sensitive to every sound that came from the distant recess over which the funereal drapery hung. Sometimes she heard the sound of footsteps pacing to and fro, up and down, with a wearisome monotony and restlessness that told of a spirit chafing and striving. Occasionally there was a movement as if some piece of furniture were

being shifted from place to place; but more frequently there were long, deathlike silences, when not so much as a stir or rustle betokened the presence of human life in the shadowy embrasure; and these silences were to the girl's sensibility most painful to bear, for they seemed pregnant with significance, weighted with untold agony.

It was a relief to them all when Rob one day regained his feet, and announced his ability to walk, and they climbed the hill to the little home, doubly dear to them after the fiery ordeal it had passed unscathed.

The leaves of the oak were scorched upon one side; a curtain that had fluttered out of a window hung, a charred rag, in the opening; and a single dark stain on the enamel covering the substance of which the house was made told of the futile effort the flames had made to gain possession of the dwelling. With this single exception, the cottage was untouched, but around it all was desolation.

"Looks as if lightning had struck it!" observed Rob.

"It 's a blasted heath. The witches have been holding high carnival on it!" cried Amy fantastically.

Although few of the trees had fallen, they presented a melancholy appearance, with blackened trunks and naked boughs, while the ground beneath was carpeted with pale gray ashes. Not a green leaf or blade of grass, or a single bud or flower, was spared. Even the vigorous climbing-rose that Amy had been training when the alarm was given had

writhed from its fastenings and fallen to the ground, distorted and charred.

The utter desolation of the pretty garden over which she had so faithfully toiled might well have daunted a stouter heart than Amy Judith's; but the spirit that had so many times before faced disaster with undiminished courage blazed up afresh at sight of the havoc the fire had wrought.

"At any rate, all the weeds are killed. That is one thing to rejoice over. And I 've always understood ashes were excellent fertilizers. We 've certainly had the ground enriched on a large scale," she said blithely.

Days and weeks moved slowly by, and still Mr. Paul maintained his mysterious seclusion. Occasionally he paid a brief evening call at the cottage, but the strange air of remoteness and separation that had marked him in the days of their enforced stay at the cabin still encompassed him, and when he rose to go, his departure brought a sense of relief to all three.

In these days Mr. Paul seemed to have resigned his customary interests, all of his time being absorbed by the secret undertaking upon which his whole being seemed intent. Rob, who brought and carried his light mail, observed the neglected condition of his little garden, the air of forlornness and even disorder that invested the cabin, but a sense of delicacy and reserve, new to the boy, restrained him from either offering his services or intruding impertinent inquiries.

One day, as Rob lingered to give a handful of

grass to the sorrel mare, whinnying at the end of her tether, Mr. Paul came out with an open letter in his hand.

"Rob, I wish you 'd put the mare in harness and hurry down to meet the afternoon train. I 'm expecting a friend, and I want you to bring him up. It 's due at 2.30, and there 's no time to lose."

Mr. Paul seemed quite his old self. There was a smile on his face, but he was pale and worn as a man who had engaged in some mortal contest and triumphed.

It was so long a time since the young man had asked service or favor that Rob was rejoiced to execute this commission. He hastened to exchange the mare's halter for her bridle, and was soon driving up the road which the two had carved out of the hillside the spring before. He was halfway to the village before he realized that in his haste he had forgotten to ask the name of Mr. Paul's friend, but he reflected that travel was so light along the road, and arrivals at the station so few, that he could scarcely fail to intercept the expected guest.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON THE TRACK OF A COUNTERFEITER

Mr. Paul's singular seclusion had attracted the attention of others besides the dwellers of the paper cottage, and it is needless to state that the outside world placed a less liberal construction upon it.

For weeks his cabin had been closed to passers-by, and although this withdrawal of hospitality worked no hardship in the mildest season of the year, it was regarded as an affront to travelers up the trail, — an incivility which, added to other offenses laid at the young man's door, provoked the public indignation and prepared public sentiment for what was to follow.

"Boys, I 've found my man!"

It was the sheriff of the county who spoke. He had summoned his entire force in consultation, and the men had promptly obeyed the call, knowing that only an emergency of extraordinary importance could have stirred their phlegmatic chief to such a measure.

They knew at once to what he referred. For months past a genuine sensation had been bubbling and fermenting along the Vernal Hills. The coast counties of southern California had recently been flooded with counterfeit coin, and although the

brightest agents in the government's employ had been assigned to that locality, all efforts to trace the spurious coin to its source had been unavailing. A short time previous, one of these secret agents had paid this district a visit, and had declared his conviction that the counterfeiters' den was not a dozen miles from the Vernal Hills. Since then every man on the constabulary force had been on the lookout. False trails innumerable had been taken up and run down, but the artful offenders were still at large.

All looked their interest and awaited the sheriff's further confidence.

"It 's that fellow Paul, who 's been living up there on Escondido Creek."

"Gee-whillikins! You mean to say he 's been carrying on this business all along, right under our noses?"

"I mean to say nothin' I can't prove!" returned the sheriff discreetly, enjoying the sensation he had produced.

"I ain't one mite surprised. Not one mite! I 've said to myself all along there was something wrong about that fellow Paul. What 's a man like him up here for, anyway? He 's no farmer, if he did harrow in a field of hay this year and a few rows of corn. And he 's no invalid. And if a man 's in good health and no farmer, what business 's he got going up into the hills and living off by hisself?" demanded another, who felt that his argument was unanswerable.

"I tell you he 's ekle to it. Any man that 'll

hide in his house when a fire 's ragin' all over the country, and let others fight to save his property, 'd steal the pennies off his dead grandmother's eyes," was the ghoulish suggestion of a gray-bearded deputy, one Watkins, who was married to a Spanish wife, and, being popularly supposed to swing a large Spanish vote by virtue of this alliance, was treated with marked respect by the autocrat who administered the law of the district.

"How 'd you drop onto it?" queried another curiously.

"Never you mind! I got there just the same!" said the sheriff, with a swagger, remembering his pledge to Orlando Birdsall, with whom he had been in secret conference that morning.

"It 's curious how McCabe stands up for that fellow Paul," remarked Burnham, a grave, middle-aged deputy, who had demonstrated his courage in more than one encounter with lawbreakers, and who, after twenty years of minor service, was reputed to have aspirations towards the shrievalty. "McCabe won't hear a word said against Paul, though he 's the man owes him a grudge if any one does, — working all day the way he did in front o' the fire, with never so much as a word of thanks for it."

"Let up, Burnham! Who cares what McCabe thinks or does n't think? He is n't in this deal. There 's some of the fellow's stuff, boys."

The sheriff passed out a handful of half-dollars so adroitly coined as to be an almost perfect imitation of Uncle Sam's legal tender. The men caught

eagerly at them, passing them from hand to hand, and demonstrating their proficiency in the art of detecting base coinage by submitting them to devious tests, biting them, rubbing them with their fingers, and ringing them on the floor. The sight of these warmed the men to new interest in the malefactor.

"Pretty good work! He 's none o' your common coin-scrapers or lead-fillers."

"Where 'd you get 'em, sheriff?" asked Burnham.

"I got 'em from the man he passed 'em off on, and that 's all you 'll know till the proper time in court," said the superior officer witheringly.

Burnham subsided amidst the scorn of his more discreet fellows.

"Now we 've got work on hand, and it 's work that won't admit of no fooling!" resumed the high functionary. "We 've got to go cautious about it, and not scare our game, or he 'll run or shoot. A man who 's up to such work is always on his guard, for he knows sooner or later he 'll be took."

"You bet!" assented an admiring deputy.

"S'pose he 's alone in it?" ventured Burnham.

"I don't s'pose anything. All I know is what I find out. Now what I purpose to do is to go up Hidden Creek and take him, dead or alive, this very afternoon."

"That 's the talk!" said Burnham approvingly.

"I don't need your opinion of my qualifications, Joe Burnham!" said the sheriff disdainfully. "It 's on the votes of my constituency, and them that

swings 'em, I depend for election, not on your approval. Now we 'd better be all armed, — Winchesters for long range and six-shooters for close quarters. Who knows the trails up that way best? I ain't been up there myself this six year."

"It 'd be a daisy place to get cornered in," chuckled Watkins, with a freedom born of the consciousness of that long Spanish vote at his back. "A regular gorge, where Paul's cabin stands, narrow, with steep sides. There 's places there, if I remember the gulch rightly, where one man could wipe out an army. And then again there 's places where a good-sized company could stow theirselves away for weeks and see everything going on in the cañon, and no one be the wiser."

"Then that last 's the sort of spot we want to make for. Who 's the man can show the way?"

"The best man to pilot us up there is Jim Jones. He knows every foot of the hills by heart. They ain't a squirrel-hole or fox-burrow for twenty mile around that Jim Jones don't know."

"All right, boys! We 'll pick Jim Jones up down to the depot as we go by. He never misses seeing the train come in when he 's in town. Keep close mouths, all of you. There 's a reward out, and a clean capture means a little money and more glory for you all."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE MAN IN THE PRIVATE CAR

When the afternoon train pulled into the station that day, it brought behind it a private car of more than ordinary magnificence. Such arrivals were not uncommon in the valley, but they invariably passed on with the train. On this occasion the excitement of the populace was aroused when, with a couple of runs of the engine up and down the track, the car was detached on a side-switch.

This excitement grew apace when it was whispered about that the owner and occupant of the private car was none other than the Hon. Jasper Harmon, foremost politician and silver-tongued orator of the Pacific Coast, a power in the most august body in the nation, and who had lately received prominent mention in connection with the highest office in the gift of the people.

It was rumored that the senator had come up to look after a wavering constituency in the Vernal Hills. That so great a man should condescend to mend his own political fences in this fertile region invested the district and the people with new importance in the latter's eyes.

The train, with a clangor of bell, a snort, and a whistle, pulled out, but the crowd about the depot

mysteriously increased in numbers instead of dispersing.

After a short delay the distinguished man, his overcoat on his arm, descended from the car and fraternally joined the crowd on the platform.

"Will any of you have the goodness to tell me where I may find Armitage's studio?" he asked pleasantly.

The sheriff, who, with his posse, had well-nigh forgotten his search for the astute Jim Jones, assumed the responsibility of answering this inquiry, as befitted his position of chief dignitary and leading politician.

"Well, now, you get me!" he responded cordially. "The only studios we got here is Lane's and Ormsby's. But if you 'll accept my advice, sir, — I 'm the sheriff of this county" (Harmon made his acknowledgment of this introduction with a graceful bow), — "you 'll go to Ormsby. Mind, I ain't saying anything against Lane, but he takes mostly tintypes, and you ought to 'a' seen the cabinets Ormsby took of my wife and children last week. Group picture. If you 'd like to look at it, my house 's only a step away" —

The sheriff had his object in pressing this invitation. For a considerable time past he had entertained the belief that with his knowledge of the language he would make a shining success as United States Minister to Spain, should opportunity put the chance in his way. A five minutes' walk with this man of power, who was popularly known to carry such trifling appointments up his sleeve,

might in all probability accomplish his dearly cherished purpose.

Senator Harmon received this information and invitation with the tact for which he was celebrated.

"Unfortunately, sir, I am not looking for a photographer to-day. Mr. Armitage writes me that he lives a little out of town, — up a stream called Escondido Creek,"

"There 's just one Escondido Creek around here, and there 's just one man lives up it," replied the sheriff oracularly. "He 's a man named Paul. Farmer by trade!" pluming himself upon his cunning in thus diverting the crowd from any suspicion they might entertain as to his party's mission, and casting a warning look at his men.

"Farmer! Pooh!" sniffed Barry, the grain-dealer, who had joined the throng and could not permit this statement to go unchallenged for the credit of the Vernal Hills agricultural district. "He 's no farmer! He came to me asking credit for some corn he wanted to plant last spring. I mistrusted him. I always mistrust these city men — begging your pardon, senator!"

"Oh, don't apologize to me. I was brought up on a farm," said the visitor.

"An' I told him I did n't believe he knew enough about farming to plant a kernel of corn right side up. He thought pretty hard a minute, did this here Mr. Paul, and then he said o' course he did! All you had to do was to place 'em all carefully, pinted end down!"

All the company roared, the Hon. Jasper Har-

mon among the rest. One voice alone was raised in Mr. Paul's defense, and this voice was McCabe's.

"All the same, before that fire came, he had as pretty a field of corn as you 'd find in all the country!"

"Nonsense, man!" interrupted a waggish old farmer. "He had it simply because no amount of wrong farming could spoil crops this year in the Vernal Hills. Why, I had a volunteer pumpkin-vine that would persist in growing side my back door last summer. My wife she poured scalding water on it, and dug it up time and agin; actually salted it down once, an' thought she had it! Well, we went down camping to Point Concepcion for a fortnight, an' when we got back, I 'll be durned if the pesky thing had n't clumb the kitchen porch an' stuck a shoot through the top of a kitchen winder my wife left open to keep the room well aired, an' there, square over the stove, a-hangin' from the ceiling, was a couple of yellow pumpkins all ready for Thanksgiving pies. Must have weighed fifty pounds apiece. Lucky thing we got home when we did, for if one o' them big golden apples had taken a notion to drop down to get ready for roasting, our stove would 'a' been nothing but a heap o' scrap iron."

"Ah, those were pumpkins worth growing!" remarked the senator genially. "I think it was in one of your pumpkin patches here, along the foot of the Vernal Hills, where that pretty little romance transpired that I heard of the other day."

All the crowd looked blankly at the senator,

who seemed to look each straight in the eye, with an expression of the truest candor and earnest.

"What was that? Seems to me I heard tell of it, but I disremember just this minute," said Barry, the grain-dealer, putting on a reflective scowl.

"Oh, the story runs this way," said Harmon thoughtfully. "A young railroad man, or banker from the East, or foreign potentate — I really forget which — was traveling on horseback through this valley, when he turned into a nicely cultivated field owned by one of your most prosperous ranchmen. The owner came to meet him, and the young man explained that he had heard great stories of the big pumpkins raised in this locality, and wished to verify them for himself. 'Is it actually true,' he asked, 'that you raise pumpkins around here weighing as much as a hundred and seventy pounds?'

"'Now, see here, young man,' said the farmer, 'I 'm not one who wants to brag of the products of the country, but seeing 's believing, and you just come out to my pumpkin patch and take a look 'round for yourself.'

"So they both started off to the pumpkin-field, stopping an instant at the house for the ranchman to get on his best hat and to whisper a word to his wife. They reached the field by a roundabout way, and found a nice bit of bottom land, gentlemen, which kept its moisture all summer, and crops growing all the fall; and the stranger was so carried away by the glorious sight before him that he gasped with amazement, and professed himself more than satisfied with the proof of the fairy tales he had heard.

"'They 're fair-sized, — good for a prize at most any Eastern county fair, every last one of 'em. Out here competition 's sharper,' said the farmer, drawing out his knife and pruning an apple-tree. 'But size ain't all there is to them pumpkins. Do you know' — dropping his voice to a mysterious whisper — 'some of them big yellow ones, when we cut 'em open, have pretty girls inside!'

"'You don't say!' cried the stranger, very much startled, and not knowing whether to think the old man a liar or a lunatic.

"'Yes, sir,' the old farmer assured him. 'Now there 's that big golden fellow near the tall almond-tree. I don't know whether he 'll pan out one or not, but he looks promisin'. You just watch while I cut him open!'

"He made a slit around the stem end of the pumpkin, which happened to be on top, and lifted it off, and out stepped a pretty red-cheeked, black-eyed girl, — the ranchman's eldest daughter. The story goes that the young nabob was so entranced that he married the girl next week."

A general guffaw followed, in the midst of which the waggish old ranchman stepped forward, and, crooking his finger warningly at the senator, said in a stage whisper: —

"Now, look here, Senator Harmon! It 's a good story, — a blamed good story! and it 's all right your telling it here, for we 're a company of men. But don't you go telling it round over the country, or all our girls 'll go climbing into pumpkins, and we shan't have ary one left to feed our stock!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

ROB'S POLITICAL CONVERSION

"But this is n't getting on in my errand up here," resumed the senator, when the crowd had its laugh out. "Is it possible that none of you can tell me where I can find Armitage? A man like him can't possibly have lived among you three years and kept his light hid under a bushel. Armitage, the famous painter, who stands at the head of American landscape artists! Armitage, who stripped the Parisian schools of their medals when he was a beardless boy! Time 's getting on," he said, consulting his watch; "I shall be greatly disappointed if I can't find Armitage to-night."

Rob, who had, to his discomfiture, failed to discover any trace of Mr. Paul's expected guest, a couple of villagers and one lone commercial traveler having been the only passengers to leave the train, had been one of the enthralled listeners to the senator's genial story-telling. He heard this speech with his head in a whirl. A sudden recollection engulfed him. When parting with Fowler back in the mountains, nearly a year before, upon the occasion of his visit to the surveyors' camp, the chief had called after him: —

"Be sure to give my compliments to Armitage,

and ask him to take care of any of the boys I may send down!"

"Armitage!" Rob had repeated, looking blankly at the young surveyor, — "Armitage! Who 's he?"

"Hang it! I meant to say Mr. Paul. Names are such confounded things. I 'm always getting them mixed in these high altitudes," was Fowler's naïve apology, and Rob had ridden away, never giving the matter a second thought till now.

He pushed his way through the crowd, his heart throbbing like a drum.

"Beg your pardon, sir! I think I know the gentleman you 're looking for. He was expecting somebody on the train to-day."

"Then you 're my man!" exclaimed the senator heartily. "Can you show me the way up there this afternoon? Eh, going up there yourself? Can give me a seat in your cart? That 's capital! Well, Isaiah," to his negro servant, who had come forward for parting orders, "look for me when I come, and keep the boys straight while I 'm gone."

Saying which, the visitor swung himself into the cart by Rob's side, and the two rode off together to the wonder and surprise of the crowd.

"If there is any way of traveling I like more than another, it is jaunting in one of these little carts over a country road," declared the senator, as the sorrel mare sped through the village and past orchards with green leaves still clinging to branches where spring buds were swelling.

This speech was an immense relief to Rob, who had been secretly very much embarrassed at having

to invite so celebrated a man to take a seat in so shabby and insignificant a vehicle; for the cart had long since lost its polish and gloss, thumping over rough roads in rain and sunshine, and presented a decidedly weather-beaten appearance.

Now Rob, all of whose political proclivities and family traditions pointed to alliance with a very different party from that which Senator Harmon so ably represented, was destined to have the party affiliations of his life changed in the course of a single hour's ride.

"Live on a farm, eh? When I was a boy, I used to live on a farm in western New York;" and the senator began a story of simple experience, which moved the boy as no tale of romance he had ever read had power to do.

Hitherto Rob had regarded the party which Mr. Harmon represented, and which chanced to be the party in power, as a mere aggregation of rogues and tricksters, its motive plunder, its policy knavery. But listening to the honorable orator's pleasant little talk at the station, he had already begun to modify his previous convictions. Had he but known it, his political fate was sealed.

When Senator Harmon got to the point of making a confidence about "When I was a boy on a farm," he was irresistible. Vast audiences had thrilled under his frank accounts of his boyhood life, wavering voters had been conciliated, rabid enemies discomfited. Before Rob had reached the county highway, he was wondering whether men, after all, were not of much more importance than

parties or political principles. Before they had turned off into the hill road, he had decided that the sentiments of Senator Harmon were worth adopting without question. Long before they reached the mesa, he was eagerly reckoning the days and months that would elapse before his name would be on the great register, and he could proudly follow the senator as his standard-bearer, and cast his vote for him and his party.

Nor did Mr. Harmon confine the conversation to himself. As they approached the hills, his observant eye detected signs of the scourge which had swept down their slopes a few weeks previous, and little by little he drew from Rob a modest account of his own part in the stern fight that had been waged to check it. He saw the marks on the boy's hands and face, and said with a sincerity of feeling that no man could have affected: —

"Honorable scars, my boy. Be proud of them to the end of your days. Not half the heroes are found at the battle front."

A man of broad and varied tastes, Harmon was keenly alive to the beauty of the scenery as they began to climb the hills, and every turn of the road disclosed some new and charming view. His simple, appreciative comments disclosed a strong vein of sentiment that underlaid a character at once bold and diplomatic, aggressive and tactful. As they came out upon the edge of the mesa overlooking the windings of Escondido Creek, Rob pointed out the quaint cabin, looking like some mimic fortress, with massive breastwork of stone and great trees

doing sentinel duty beside it, which formed Mr. Paul's habitation.

"Armitage has chosen a charming retreat!" cried the senator, with enthusiasm. "And you live in the cottage up there in the tree? What an original idea, and what a picture it makes! You 're highly favored, my boy, in having a man of Armitage's culture for a friend and neighbor. No one can measure the influence of refined associations."

Now Rob, who every little while was overcome with desperate uncertainty as to whether he might not have made a stupendous mistake in seizing upon this gentleman as Mr. Paul's expected friend, was tortured with a succession of grotesque pictures at the great man's every reference to Armitage. The picture that now arose before his mind's eye was of Mr. Paul in blue overalls and jumper, plodding along the moist furrows with bent shoulders, holding the ploughshare to its course, while he, Rob, followed after, dropping grain. Again, he recalled him exhausted, his face dripping perspiration, throwing himself down in the shade of tree or bush to snatch a frugal luncheon.

"Pity he should bury himself up here. Society can ill spare Armitage. He 's one of the most delightful fellows I ever knew."

The picture that Rob saw now was of Mr. Paul at the supper-board, too tired to eat, but disguising his lack of appetite with gay speech and merry anecdote. Something swelled in Rob's throat. He did not know whether to laugh or to cry. Always a gentleman; always polished of manner and cour-

teous of speech, patient and forbearing under every trial and discouragement. And instead of the poor and luckless farmer Rob had imagined him, could he be Armitage, the celebrated artist, one of the great men of the earth? What did it all mean? The problem was too much for the boy's brain.

Amy's predictions were already on their way to fulfillment, and a cloak of green, nourished by new elements in the soil, covered the ground below the cottage, and the delicate tracery of vines was beginning to show against the gnarled oaks. Most marvelous of all, the oaks themselves, with boles still black and charred, were putting forth fresh leaves.

Under them stood a slight girlish figure clad in short denim gown and rubber boots, directing the stream from a hose upon the green carpet.

Senator Harmon looked at her long and keenly, then over his face came a look of surprised recognition as he lifted his hat in grave courtesy, while Rob, with a nod and wave of his hand, drove on.

In the cañon the ravages of the fire were more noticeable, but nature was already covering the scars, and an early rain had freshened the landscape, effacing the uglier traces of the fire-fiend's work. The cabin, now silhouetted against the rich greens of the untouched hillside beyond, looked mediæval in its simplicity, but the place had a deserted air.

"You are sure Armitage is expecting me? I would n't intrude upon him for the world, if he 's occupied," said the senator, with sudden misgiving.

"He 's looking for you," said Rob doggedly, de-

termined to see his blunder, if blunder it be, to the bitter end. Again a queer reminiscence assailed him. He remembered the time when he had found fault with Mr. Paul's furrows, insisting that they were neither straight nor true. And Mr. Paul, resigning the task to him and meekly accepting his seed-apron in exchange, had tramped behind him, and, looking back when the field was traversed, had acknowledged with humility that the boy's furrow was much more creditable than his own. Rob had been very gracious that time, and had kindly undertaken to show Mr. Paul the cause of his superior work, directing him how to hold the plough-handles, and just how to bear down upon them when the implement struck against a rock or root. And Mr. Paul had certainly profited by his teaching, and been a much better ploughman thereafter.

Rob had an hysterical impulse to laugh, as he wondered what the world would think if it could know that he had actually trained Mr. Armitage — Armitage, the great landscape painter! — to plough straight furrows. Oh, the absurdity, the towering impertinence of it!

The door of the cabin opened, and Mr. Paul appeared. Harmon sprang from the cart and hastened up the steps.

"Armitage! My dear fellow, how are you!"

"It was good of you to come all the way up here, Harmon!"

"I 'd do it any day to see you. What have you been doing all this time? All the world has been wondering where you have been hiding."

The two men passed into the house, talking fast and eagerly, with the freedom and confidence of old friends. A few minutes later the door opened and Mr. Paul came down the steps, stopping short as he saw Rob.

"Rob, I beg your pardon. I 'd completely forgotten you. Let me tie the horse to a tree while you run up to the cottage and bring Amy. Say to her that I wish her to be present at the lifting of the black curtain."

Rob never knew how he covered the ground lying between cabin and cottage. Flushed and breathless he burst upon his sister, who, embarrassed at her recent encounter, was standing with folded arms resting on a window-sill and looking out upon the distant sea.

"Amy!" he cried, "come at once! Mr. Paul wants you. And he is n't Mr. Paul at all, but he 's Armitage, the famous painter, Senator Harmon's friend."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A CHAPTER OF REVELATIONS

"ARMITAGE, who is that boy?"

"Robert Judith."

"Judith. I thought so. Has his father's brow and eyes. You remember Tom Judith? Used to be on the Stock Board. Shot himself when the crash in Consolidated Virginia came. The shock killed his wife. But tell me, how in the name of common sense does Amy Judith happen to be up here?"

"Amy Judith?"

"Yes, Amy Judith. I never forget a face. I knew her the moment I saw her, but, coming upon that exquisite little girl in a short gown and rubber boots, irrigating a berry patch, I confess I was posed for a moment."

"Amy Judith? She — why, she 's homesteading government land," was the embarrassed reply.

"Homesteading! You must be mistaken, Armitage."

"I have pretty good reason to be sure of it," replied the young man ruefully.

"It 's inconceivable! That gifted little being! You 're quite sure, Armitage, that your head 's level and I have n't a bee in my bonnet? Amy Judith

turned ranchwoman, and trying to establish a title to a quarter section of government land! Wonders will never cease."

Somehow this speech inspired the younger man with a wretched sense of discomfort.

"Miss Judith is certainly a charming woman, but I don't know that I should characterize her as 'gifted.' So you know her, Harmon?"

"Know her! Man alive! I never had the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with her, but who in San Francisco did n't know her?"

"I did n't. I never heard of her till I came up here, Harmon. Is n't there some mistake?"

"Mistake! You pretend to say you never heard of Amy Judith? Confound you, Armitage! You artists are always so clannish, you don't realize there 's a world outside your set. Why, man, all San Francisco was raving over Amy Judith's voice three years ago. I heard her at a private recital given before the Bohemian Club the night before I left for Japan. Great Scott, how she sang! Her voice was surpassingly pure and sweet, and of phenomenal range. They called her 'the coming Patti.' She was to make her first public appearance the following week. I don't keep up with such matters myself, but I supposed she 'd sung her way to fame and fortune long ago."

"Hush! She 's coming."

On their way to Mr. Paul's cabin Rob's attention was attracted by the peculiar actions of the mastiff, who accompanied them, and who was evidently very much excited by the presence of some wild

beast somewhere in the cañon, whose approach his keen scent had detected. Hercules barked furiously, and made savage dashes into the thick growth of chaparral beyond the cabin, returning from these sorties, his dark eyes eloquent with appeal.

"Quiet, Hercules!" commanded his young master. "What do you care if a wildcat or badger is sneaking down to rob some ranchman's hen-roost to-night? They 're not your chickens, sir!"

But these remonstrances had no effect on the animal, who continued to make fiercer attacks upon the thickets, gradually changing the direction of his skirmishes further and further up the gulch.

"If I had time, I 'd come and see what it is, old boy. But just now I 'd advise you to let up on your chase."

Rob's advice was wiser than he knew. He little guessed that more than once, when Hercules barked so loudly in the chaparral, the dog was looking down the barrel of a Winchester, loaded and cocked.

Amy Judith had changed her gardening-gown for a plain white mull without garniture or ornament, but no queen ever carried her crown with a more regal bearing than her head wore its coronet of fair braids. Yet in the deep-blue eyes was a look that challenged Paul Armitage to account for his deception.

"Mr. Harmon, Miss Judith! Rob, you need no introduction."

Senator Harmon took her hand with a pleasant little speech. The girl was very quiet and subdued. All her ready wit and sprightliness seemed to have

deserted her, and not even the stranger's magnetic conversation could arouse her to any animation.

"Miss Amy, I wanted you to be present at the lifting of the black curtain," said Armitage lightly. Then, to Harmon: —

"I 've been hoping the sun might come out and give us better light. It 's a pity, when you 've traveled so far to see it, Harmon, that we should have this dull, overcast day and obscure atmosphere. The fog seems to have got into the room."

His friend eyed Armitage curiously. In the course of his life he had many times encountered that humility which laments the quality of fare or accommodation which is placed before a guest, but it struck him that this was an entirely new phase of hospitality which deprecated the quality of its sunlight.

Armitage led the way to the further end of the apartment and laid his hand on the heavy draperies.

"Miss Amy first, if you don't mind, Harmon."

With a quick movement of his hand he swept aside the black curtain, and the four found themselves gazing into the mysterious space that lay beyond.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE SHERIFF MEETS HIS WATERLOO

THE sheriff and his posse, traveling for the most part on foot and by many and devious routes, as became brave men who had an important capture in prospect and must needs approach it warily, at last reached a point in the east arm of the gulch below Mr. Paul's cabin, and stopped to hold a council of war.

"If he sees us coming, he 'll know everything 's up, and most likely fire. There 's no use throwing our lives away. No more do we want to kill him. He 's worth more alive than dead," said the sheriff. "Jim Jones, you know the country up here better 'n I do. What 's your idea of how to go to work?"

"Well now, Mr. Sheriff, if you reely want my idee, and ain't got no better man to advise you," replied Jim Jones, exhibiting a becoming modesty over this distinction that commended him to all his hearers, "I say we 'd better climb up the side hill there to that steep place the fire missed, — I 'll tell you when we reach it, — an' then lay low and creep through the chaparral till we git round yon, where there 's neyther brush nor yit trees in the way, and I can level my glass on the windows an' see the lay

of the land before we go down, which last I 'd do at nightfall, sure, and no sooner!"

The glass Jim alluded to was a fine field-glass which he was accustomed to carry with him on his mountain trips, and which swung from a strap over his shoulder.

The party cautiously advanced under cover of the trees, until Jim gave the signal to climb the hillside, an ascent accomplished with difficulty, for the slope was nearly vertical, and the substratum of rock but thinly veneered with a slippery coating of soil and short deer-grass, which afforded an uncertain foothold, but they at length halted for further orders, staying themselves by clutching at the brush and weeds.

"It ought to be along here, but it ain't. Must be a little higher. Here it is," said Jim Jones. "It ain't much of a trail. I 'm not settled myself whether it 's one of the old Indian paths, grown over, or jest a mountain lion or coyote path. But it goes through all right. I followed fox tracks all the way up it one day last spring."

The stouter members of the company looked doubtfully at the slender parting in the chaparral, roofed over with tightly interlaced green boughs. The brush on either side seemed impenetrable.

"No danger o' going astray!" chuckled Watkins.

At the command of their superior officer, the men plunged into this burrow, Burnham leading and the others following in single file, the sheriff near the rear of the procession, with Jim Jones close behind him.

Now the sheriff of the Vernal Hills district, albeit a very efficient and democratic officer, as may be seen by this personal participation in the perils of the execution of the law, was a gentleman of Falstaffian proportions, and it chanced that midway in the course of this painful journey he stuck fast between a projecting root, on the one hand, and a jutting ledge, on the other.

It would be impossible to describe the wretchedness of the shrievalty's body, or the embarrassment of its mind, in this unparalleled predicament. The man in advance could by no possibility turn around to come to his chief's relief, and the man behind had but limited opportunity to assist in the big man's rescue. To add to the horrors of the situation, some great tawny beast, with the roar of an African lion, was darting into the chaparral beside him, threatening the helpless man with instant annihilation.

"Draw a bead on him, Bob! He 's coming straight at me. I can see his dripping fangs. Can't you break away that root, Jim Jones? A pretty pickle you 've got me in, have n't you! Oh, give me my hands where my legs are, and I 'd be out of this fix in a jiffy!"

"If I had a drill and a pinch of giant powder now," said Jim Jones slowly, "I 'd make a hole in this rock and blow it to smithereens before you could say Jack Robinson."

"Much good it 'd do me!" groaned the sheriff.

Jim considered the situation from a scientific point of view.

"Well, now, it seems to me, you got in this place goin' for'ards. And I argy that what 's done can always be undone, if you go sensible about it. You 've pulled ahead, an' pulled ahead, till you 've wedged yourself like a cork in a bottle. Wherefore we 'll just try the contrary. Now I 'll lay hold of your legs, an' you back for all you 're worth!"

In his zeal to extricate himself from his unhappy dilemma, the sheriff exceeded his instructions. He kicked out violently with one leg, narrowly missing Jim Jones's right eye, and striking the latter's precious field-glass a blow with his hob-nailed boot that discounted an ostrich's kick.

"Now you 've done it. Broke one o' my lenses, da-a-arn you!" howled Jim Jones, as the sheriff, made free by this Herculean effort, contrived to face him in a sitting posture. Before so great a catastrophe the shrievalty was mute.

"The best glass ever made in Frisco! I would n't ha' taken two hundred dollars for it," Jim went on, examining the injured instrument. Then, in a sudden burst of wrath: —

"What do you mean, a-throwing up your heels that away like a yearling colt? You ought to be ashamed o' yourself. Sheriff o' this county, too!"

"I did n't mean to, Jim," said the sheriff humbly. "I — I 'll get you a better one!"

"Where 'll you get it? In the Vernal Hills, eh?"

"Jim, I 'll give you half my part of the reward — share an' share alike, when we get this counterfeiter in jail. I 've got to pay the other men, but I 'll

cut them down to the lowest notch an' go snacks with you."

"I s'pose it 's the best I can do, but I 'd a heap rather have my field-glass," grumbled Jim sulkily. "Well, git along now, and make time! And don't be gittin' stuck in the next thornbush you come to, or I 'll leave you there for the buzzards to pick!"

With scratched faces, grimy and ragged garments, and damaged tempers, the party finally emerged in the clearing. Jim Jones was still soured by the accident that had befallen his glass.

"Ain't no use tryin' to see with one glass. Ain't no focus to it!" he grumbled, vainly trying to level his one remaining lens and fix a single optic on the row of windows fronting them in the little cabin. "All I can see, they 's two men in the room, an' they ain't doin' a blamed thing but standin' still! Darn 'em!"

"What 's that shinin' thing on the north roof? Glass! I can see that much with my naked eye," said Burnham.

"Then that means a light in the roof of the part the black curtain shuts off!"

"You 're right, boys! That 's his little workshop where he makes the stuff!"

"Tell you what, Jim Jones," said the sheriff propitiatingly, "knowin' the lay of the land, suppose you slide down there an' try an' see what 's goin' on through the windows."

"I 've a better idee 'n that, sheriff. You see how nigh that ledge o' rock is to the roof. I 'll

take off my shoes, an' git on the roof, an' take a squint at the whole blame outfit."

This valiant proposal was hailed with general approval.

"Mind, you fire your six-shooter if you 're in trouble, or want we should close in!" suggested the sheriff. Jim Jones forthwith departed, while the remainder of the posse, painfully conscious that their exposed position might make them a target for a shot from the desperate occupant of the cabin, should they be detected, strove to efface themselves from observation by identifying themselves with the ledge in every imaginable cramped attitude, while they patiently awaited the result of Jim Jones's reconnoissance.

The scout felt himself peculiarly favored on this expedition when he found that the great dog, who had been angrily watching and loudly announcing the progress of the party through the brush, had temporarily subsided. He worked his way, unobserved, to the vicinity of the cabin, and gained a position on the hillside where Mr. Paul had chiseled out his stone chimney, making the roof of easy access. Gaining this with the stealth and agility of a cat, the scout stood erect to take observations, and was startled to perceive Miss Judith and her brother coming together down the road and making a straight course for the cabin.

Now by the same token that he detested Mr. Paul, Jim Jones cherished a great admiration for Miss Judith, and he immediately laid flat against the cabin roof, thanking his lucky stars that he had

seen the young lady in time, and in the same breath anathematizing his ill luck for setting this particular day and hour for the apprehension of the law-breaker.

He heard Mr. Paul's hearty greeting, a door which opened and shut, and then the murmur of voices, which appeared to gradually move towards the north end of the house, until he could plainly distinguish them directly beneath that portion of the roof on which he was lying. It is to be feared that it was a consuming curiosity, rather than any sense of good faith to the mission upon which he had been dispatched, which led him to draw himself, inch by inch, like a writhing serpent, along the ridgepole to where the skylight glittered in the sunshine.

This point at length gained, he peered cautiously over the edge of the panes and dimly saw Mr. Paul, Miss Judith, and Rob, together with a strange gentleman whose countenance was somewhat familiar, the gaze of all seemingly concentrated upon some object on the opposite side of the apartment.

Jim Jones felt that he must gain a view of this interesting object, whatever it was, and he accordingly again mounted to the ridgepole, and essayed to drag himself noiselessly along the slippery shakes.

CHAPTER XL

THE BLACK CURTAIN IS LIFTED

THE little apartment disclosed by the lifting of the black curtain was as bare and destitute of comfort as a monk's cell. A case with drawers, a stool, an easel, a jar with brushes, constituted its sole fittings, but against the easel rested a canvas, which drew from Harmon a low exclamation of delight.

The scene was laid in the depths of a wood. The shadows were deep and long, but the rays of the setting sun found their way through the dense canopy of foliage and fell full upon a feminine figure clad in some ethereal gray stuff, a crown of scarlet berries on her shining hair, the glory and expectation of immortal youth in her startled eyes. Suppleness and grace were in every line of the slender figure, which stood with one bare foot lightly resting upon the roots of a gnarled oak, and with a shapely arm upraised, as if she were surprised in the act of touching some secret latch which gave admission to her sylvan dwelling.

"The Hamadryad! I see you 've gone back to Greek mythology for your subject," said Harmon thoughtfully. "Armitage, it is your masterpiece!"

Rob was gazing, entranced, at this magical creation of human fancy and human hands. But ah!

he could not help remembering the baser uses to which these hands had been so often put, the heavy tasks they had performed, the homely drudgery they had so patiently discharged.

Amy could not speak. Her thoughts flew back to a Christmas Day when she had declared a truce with her enemy and he had crowned her with manzanita berries. Mr. Paul had plainly found his magic purse again. It need nevermore be empty.

"I 'm sorry the light is so poor," said the young man again. "It 's rather a dark picture to show on such a dismal day."

Again Harmon marveled. A mellow glow fell through the skylight above, flooding the picture with light.

"Miss Amy," said the painter, coming around to her side and speaking in an undertone, "I hope you 'll forgive the harmless little deception about my name. The fact is, I came up here for an indefinite period, to rest my eyes. It was imperative. The only way to do it was to hide from everybody, for they besieged me with commissions. It was a constant temptation. This was done on an old order I had from the national government. I 've been on the point of telling you more than once. But there was so much to be explained."

He stopped abruptly.

"It is n't of the least consequence. Don't give it a second thought," returned Amy indifferently. "What does a name amount to, anyhow? Our fathers changed theirs at pleasure, and no three generations in the same family are likely to retain

the same spelling where there is a chance for deviation."

"True," said Armitage. "Even the law recognizes a man's right to name and rename himself at pleasure, and he can legally transact business under any title he chooses to adopt, so long as it is n't another man's property, or he does n't assume it for dishonest purposes."

"In this case the offense amounts to nothing," assented Amy. "We have merely formed a little habit which it may take time to unlearn. That is all."

This sounded very amiable and reasonable, but Armitage could not help wishing that Amy were not quite so complaisant.

"We have each had some reserves from the other," he said meaningly.

The senator turned to the young lady.

"And this is the little song-bird who enchanted all the critics of the Bohemian Club," he remarked, with a pleasant smile. "How do you come to have hidden yourself away in this wilderness, Miss Judith? Pardon me for saying that you have a future too brilliant to be sacrificed in this way."

"The bird was slain that very night, Mr. Harmon," she replied, with piteous candor. "I suppose I went out into the fog without muffling my throat properly. The next time I tried to sing, my voice was gone."

"Surely you took medical advice? A good physician ought to have helped you."

"I saw them all. There was nothing to be done,"

she said, the bitterness of memory making her voice pathetic. "It was an obstinate form of throat trouble, never any acute inflammation, but in chronic form from the first. I was advised to come up here, but I put hope behind me."

Her simple story of disappointment and failure seemed to emphasize the distance between the great painter, whose touch was like the alchemist's of old, bringing fortune, friends, and fame, and herself, a helpless woman, with her one talent destroyed.

Armitage appeared to be looking past her, listening intently, with an expression on his face she had never seen before.

"I beg your pardon for bringing this up," said Harmon, in genuine contrition.

"It belongs to another life," said Amy Judith steadily. "I have found new occupation, new interests, and I am perfectly content, perfectly happy."

At this moment there came an unexpected diversion. A shadow darkened the skylight, there was a sound of something slipping and scrambling on the roof, and the next instant, with a shower of glass, a man crashed head first through the flimsy skylight, striking a palette spread with fresh colors that was lying on the chest of drawers, thence caroming to the floor, which he reached in a sitting posture, while with a sullen report a revolver discharged, sending a ball of large calibre harmlessly into the wall.

All gathered around this unbidden guest to ascertain his identity, and incidentally to discover the extent of his injuries.

The man himself was too dazed to speak, but sat upright and stared foolishly about him.

"This is rather an unceremonious descent upon us, my fine fellow," said Harmon. "What 's your name? Can't you present your card?"

Still the new-comer stared speechlessly about him.

"I should say he was suffering from an ultramarine concussion of the brain and a raw umber fracture of the maxillary process," asserted Harmon, gravely addressing Armitage.

"He 's certainly got a chrome-yellow contusion of the right eye, and a complication of sepia and prussian blue on his cheek," returned Armitage as seriously.

"With a liberal shading of rose madder," suggested Miss Judith, for streaks of blood trickling down the intruder's face began to testify to the wounds he had received in transit, and, combined with his plastering of moist colors, caused him to resemble an Indian brave who had been studying in the impressionist school.

"How would it do to treat him on the homœopathic plan? Give him a dose of Venetian red and apply a plaster of cobalt?" pursued Harmon.

"I should incline to a surgical operation on the allopathic principle," replied Armitage. "It seems to me his only hope is heroic scraping with the palette knife."

"Was I saying anything about the political situation? What paper do you think he represents? How much do you suppose he overheard?" asked Harmon of Armitage, in an undertone.

"I don't really think he *is* a reporter," Armitage replied, scrutinizing the features of his unbidden guest as well as he could with their bizarre decorations. "I believe he 's a fellow who lives around here, a man known as Jim Jones, — perfectly innocent of writing for the press, whatever other iniquities he may be guilty of."

"Thank Heaven!" said the senator.

"Jim Jones," said Armitage severely, "what were you doing on my roof?"

"Darn your old roof and your skylight!" said Jim Jones vigorously, finding breath and voice. "I 'll sue you for damages, — having 16 oz. glass in that skylight, — see if I don't! The idee that when a man 's chasing a coyote down the hills an' the critter jumps on a roof, an' a man follers after him, he 's got to tumble through death-traps like this!"

"Chasing coyotes — on a roof!" Rob bent double with laughter.

The senator, with his unfailing tact, relieved the strain of the occasion.

"Rather a sudden notion, this hunting-trip of yours, Jones! I believe I saw you at the station as our train pulled in. Now, Mr. Jones," he went on suavely, "I respect your modesty, and I do not doubt Mr. Armitage sympathizes with the delicacy you show in trying to conceal the real object of your visit. But we 're all art lovers here, Jones, and there 's not one among us that does n't admire the enterprise of a man who will climb the roof of a house to get a peep at a painting like this through a skylight. Brought your field-glass along, too, I

see. Now, Armitage, here 's a tribute such as you might n't receive again in a lifetime. Get up, get up, Mr. Jones. Never mind your wounds. They 're obtained in a noble cause. Satisfy to the full the cravings of your æsthetic mind."

Jim Jones, recovering his wits, such as they were, dimly realized that something was expected of him, and, awkwardly struggling to his feet, drew his glass from its leather case, and, covering the damaged barrel of the instrument with his hand, directed it upon the canvas, focusing it with elaborate attention.

"Better perspective than when you look at it upside down, Jones?" queried the senator.

"Heap better!" said Jones desperately.

"What do you think of the chiaro-oscuro, Jones?"

"Tiptop!" returned Jones, seeking safety in brevity of answer.

"Let me see your glass, Jones."

The miserable man could do no less than extend the instrument to his inquisitor.

Harmon examined it with a quiet smile.

"Ha! I thought it was an original-looking instrument. Sort of monocular, is n't it? Or perhaps you have a glass eye, Jones?"

"I 've got just as good a pair of eyes as any man in the Vernal Hills!" declared Jones hotly.

"Glad to hear it, Jones. It 's plain to see you have the right ideas on art. Some day I 'd like to have a talk with you about the old masters. I 'd value your opinion about Murillo, Raphael, Rubens, and the lot. To-day my time 's limited; but I 'm

very happy to have met with a gentleman possessed of the refreshing interest in high art you 've evinced to-day. If you should ever visit the national capital, I 'd take pleasure in handing you passes to the art galleries."

("Darn him! He was as polite an' palavering as you please, an' I could n't tell, to save me, whether he was in dead earnest or only in joke, for all the while there was a twinkle in his eye whenever he looked at me," said Jim Jones, when retailing his adventure to the sheriff and his force that night. "But he slicked things over for me when I was in the wust mess of my life, and he gets my vote next election, you bet!")

"I believe my car 's booked to pull out on the early morning train, Armitage. Won't you come along? Take a little run down to Los Angeles with me."

"Not this time, Harmon, thank you. Of course you 'll give my regards to the boys when you reach San Francisco. And you 'll see Norcross and take up that note. But about the picture?"

"Better express it direct to Washington. I shall be back there in a month."

They were moving towards the outer door, through the black curtain, which parted sullenly to let them pass, along the great room with its odd appointments, the flotsam and jetsam of a city studio. Jim Jones brought up the rear of the procession, relieved at being for the moment spared the embarrassment of the distinguished visitor's attentions, and looking eagerly for a chance of escape, when they were all startled by the simultaneous firing of a

fusillade of shots outside, accompanied by a loud pounding on the door of the cabin. "Give yourself up peaceable, and we won't hurt a hair o' your head!" shouted a voice from without, and in the same instant there was a fierce bay and a wild stampede.

"In the name of common sense, Armitage, are these every-day occurrences in your Arcadian retreat?" demanded the senator.

"Not exactly, Harmon. It seems to be a little livelier to-day than common," Armitage replied soberly.

Rob had darted out of the door at the sound of Hercules' angry cry, and was just in time to see the sheriff turning a somersault over the corral fence, which offered the only visible fortifications.

"Here, Hercules! Lie down, boy. What would you like, sir?"

"I don't want nothing o' you. What I want is the fine gentleman who 's in that cabin."

The sheriff came out from behind his barricade, and his deputies joined him one by one.

Armitage and the senator appeared in the door of the dwelling, looking very much surprised and somewhat annoyed, while Jim Jones, still wearing his high-colored decorations, appeared behind them, wildly gesticulating.

"Did you wish to see me, Mr. Sheriff, or are you looking for my friend Armitage?" — indicating the painter, on whose shoulder his hand was resting, — asked Harmon, with dignity, and a chill look which sent the sheriff's hopes of the Spanish mission down into his boots.

The sheriff, if somewhat lacking in judgment, was a man of perception. The presence of no less a person than Senator Harmon in Mr. Paul's house, and on terms of apparent intimacy with its master, was proof conclusive that something was wrong in the information on which he had been acting. It was an embarrassing moment for him, but he rose to the occasion.

"I beg pardon, senator. It 's the man behind you I 'm after. Fact is, we were out together" —

"A-hunting!" put in Jim Jones eagerly.

"Yes, on a little hunting expedition. We got separated. That 's all there is to it. Land sakes, Jim! What 's happened to you?"

There was a general uproar as the full glory of Jim Jones's adornment became visible.

"He 's merely been dabbling in art a little. A dangerous thing for amateurs. Good-day, gentlemen!" and the senator turned on his heel.

The minor discovery that Mr. Paul and Armitage were one and the same person did not endear that gentleman to the constabulary force, or increase the sheriff's liking for him.

"Serve him right if I 'd jugged him then and there! What business 's he got coming up here fooling round with his aliases?" demanded the sheriff of his force.

The posse lingered in the hills until after sunset, and under cover of darkness went down the cañon, wisely separating when they reached the highway, where the presence of so large a body of armed men might have given rise to awkward inquiries.

CHAPTER XLI

THE BLACK CURTAIN FALLS

Armitage and his friends strolled down the road, for the senator had declared his intention of walking back to the village and would not be dissuaded from it. He sauntered along in advance with Amy Judith, finding a rare charm in the girl's sweet womanly ways and piquant speech. As he compared her fresh, unspoiled nature with the weary, world-worn air and frequently tarnished characters of great singers whom he had met, he could not help wondering whether, after all, her calamity had not been a blessing in disguise, and if the world could not better spare a great singer from its lists rather than be made the poorer by the loss of a single true and happy woman, contented within the wholesome limits of her own home life.

Armitage was following after, with Rob. The strain and confinement of the past weeks had told strangely upon him, for Rob observed that he moved wearily and heavily, often stumbling, and he seemed in a depressed mood, paying little heed to the boy's cheerful remarks, until he relapsed into silence.

They reached the clearing under the oaks beneath the cottage, stopping there for a few parting words.

"I shall always retain an exceedingly pleasant memory of this day," said Harmon. "When I get back to the turmoil and worries of office, and am wading through the slush and sleet of winter in the capital, I am going to often think of the peace and beauty of this little nook in the hills. Good-by, Miss Judith, and may life bring you compensation so rich that you will never grieve over the jewel you have lost. Good-by, Rob. Take good care of your sister. As you won't accept my invitation, Armitage, I suppose I must take leave of you as well."

"Good-by," said Armitage.

He seemed in a peculiarly absent-minded mood, for he extended his hand to Rob, who stood a few paces away to his right, while the senator was standing at his left.

Harmon saw the odd blunder, and came hastily forward to relieve the awkwardness of the error.

"I won't go any farther with you, Harmon. I must go back and rest my eyes. But do you think you can find your way? It 's such a black night, and the road is new to you."

The sun was hanging, a great crimson ball, over the western sea. A soft mist obscured the horizon, but a tremulous radiance brightened all the landscape.

A chill crept over those who listened, fear gathering in their hearts as they read confirmation in each other's eyes.

Their voicelessness was more impressive than any

speech. Armitage reeled as if he had received a blow, then stood up straight and tall, the brightness of the setting sun upon his pallid face.

"My God! The sun will never rise again for me. The black curtain has fallen forever!"

CHAPTER XLII

THE HISTORY OF THE BLACK CURTAIN

"Don't be disheartened, Armitage!" said Harmon, clasping the latter's hand, while his trembling voice showed how deeply he was moved. "You have only overtaxed your eyes again. I did n't know — I ought not to have let you undertake the commission till your cure was complete. But when you wrote me you were ready to begin work again, I supposed you were the best judge."

A great horror took possession of Rob, who had been looking on and listening, slowly comprehending the nature of the awful tragedy that had occurred, and his own agency in it.

"Oh, he is blind! He is blind! He has given his eyesight to save me!"

The senator thought the catastrophe had turned the boy's brain, and tried to soothe and hush him with a hopeful, sympathetic speech, but Rob raved on like one distracted: —

"You don't understand, Mr. Harmon. It is all my fault. He painted that picture because I had to have a certain sum of money by spring, and everything else we depended on had failed. Oh, Mr. Armitage, if it would bring back your sight to have my own eyes pierced with red-hot irons, I 'd have it done this minute" —

"Don't, Rob!"

Armitage groped for the boy's hand, hardened with honest labor and bearing a hero's scars, and held it close with a warm, loyal pressure.

"It might have happened anyhow, Rob. It is only an old weakness come back. Some day it was inevitable. I narrowly escaped it three years ago in San Francisco. My boy, don't grieve so! What is friendship, if a man may not risk his all for it? I count it well invested, Rob. Amy, have you gone? Where are you? I want you, Amy."

They led him back to his cabin, and all that night Amy Judith sat beside him, woeful and wordless, laying cooling lotions on the hot, closed eyelids. Sometimes he slept, but more often he lay with knitted brows, fighting a stern battle of resignation. When morning came and the brilliancy of dawn flooded all the earth with rejoicing light, it was not for him.

Once he said: —

"Amy, you know now why I dared not face the fire."

"And I would have called you a coward!" she murmured, with a bursting heart, laying her cheek against his, while he seized her hand and held it close to his throbbing heart; but no other caress passed between them, and the deep affection which in the one heart so hungered for a return, and in the other would have found its greatest joy in lavishing its boundless wealth upon the stricken man, remained voiceless and unconfessed.

The next day a distinguished oculist came from

the neighboring southern city, sent by Harmon, who would not be denied this effort on his friend's behalf. The specialist made a thorough examination and rendered a frank verdict. When Rob heard this sentence he left the house, half mad with grief and remorse, but Armitage made no comment, and gave no sign either of rebellion or protest.

Days passed drearily by, and Armitage, whose lips no word of revolt had once passed, came slowly to a sense of the inevitable.

"You must go back to your little home to-morrow. I cannot impose upon you in this way any longer," he announced one night, as he sat by an open window listening dreamily to the distant surf breaking against the cliffs that lined the seashore.

"Mr. Armitage, are you unwilling we should have this little chance to atone?" cried Rob, in dismay.

"Rob, you take this too much to heart. Sooner or later it was bound to come. I have known it for years. I never spared myself in my busy days. I was a spendthrift then."

"But if you had n't painted that picture" —

The boy could get no further. The magnitude of Armitage's sacrifice stupefied him. The canceled note had been returned by Norcross. He was free from any danger of prosecution, his name had been saved, life was again before him to shape according to his will — but at what a cost!

"It makes it very pleasant to have you here, — too pleasant!" Armitage went on, after a slight pause. "But I must get back to my bachelor life,

test my ability to wait upon myself, accustom myself to its limitations. Never fear but that I shall tax you enough!" he added, with a dreary smile.

"As if it could be a tax!" Rob indignantly repudiated the suggestion.

The lad went to the door and stood there looking up into the sky, wondering that the stars could bear to look down upon a world where a good and brave man, devoting himself to a noble and unselfish deed, could be so grievously punished.

"I 've been thinking that I ought to explain to you the history of the black curtain, Miss Amy," Armitage went on thoughtfully. "There 's really very little to the story, or would n't have been if the curtain had n't gone on making history for itself up here. It was one of the studio fixtures of a fellow named Towne, a moody, morose sort of man, with any amount of talent, but with a positive genius for being misunderstood. He was a genuine pessimist, and when the world refused to recognize his worth, he bought this black stuff — the boys used to declare, at an undertaker's — and stretched it across his studio wall to hide his paintings from the sight of the great public, which as a matter of fact never came near the place. Well, matters went badly with him, and one day they found him hanging behind the curtain, stark and stiff, poor fellow!

"The curtain was offered for sale with the rest of his studio effects. There was really nothing of much value; but a lot of us attended the auction and stood in on the sale for the sake of his destitute old mother. None of the boys wanted the curtain.

They had a sort of notion that Towne's spirit haunted it. I bought it simply because nobody else would have it, and when I had to give up my profession and come down here, the fancy seized me to bring it along and string it before my old easel and the other belongings of my workshop. It was a foolish notion. I 've come to feel myself that a sort of fatality attached to the drapery, that it symbolized the dark doom which has so long overhung me."

"Well, you 'll never see it again," remarked Rob, with mild satisfaction.

"No, I shall never see it again," replied the blind man sadly.

Rob flushed with distress over his unthinking speech.

"I mean," he said hastily, "that when I went to pack up the painting to send to Senator Harmon, as you directed me to, I needed something soft and thick to wrap about the frame and canvas to protect them from injury. There was nothing else handy, and I tore down the curtain. None of us will ever see it again, for the reason that by this time it 's a thousand or so miles from here."

The following day Armitage was left alone in his little cañon home, overruling every objection that could be raised.

"I am not half as helpless as you imagine me," he said to Amy cheerfully. "You see I have been anticipating this for years. I never knew at what moment it might descend upon me, and I have taught myself to go about with closed eyes, and

to recognize and discriminate between things by touch. There is scarcely an article in my cabin here that I could n't put my hand on in the dark. I have often found my way about my garden and along the path to my neighbor's garden with closed eyes. Now I must put this training to use, for I shall probably live alone all the rest of my life."

"But, Mr. Armitage, to come down to a very practical little question, you cannot undertake to cook for yourself."

"As to that, I have under consideration an offer made by one of the wood-cutters who worked here at the time of the fire. He wanted to continue to cut wood on shares in the east gulch, and proposed to put up a brush shanty and bring his wife up here to live. She will prepare my meals and render any little service I may require. Of course it 's only a makeshift, but it may do for a while, until I decide what I shall do in the future."

Amy Judith mustered courage to broach a subject that had been in her mind for days.

"Mr. Armitage," she said, "why don't you have *her* come?"

He turned to her, surprised and questioning.

"You know you showed me her portrait one day," Amy Judith went on bravely. "Looking upon her face, I can realize what she must be to you. You need her now. You ought to send for her."

"Oh, that would never do; never in this world! I could not ask so much of her."

Amy said no more, but a generous purpose was

gradually taking shape in her mind, only waiting opportunity to be put into execution.

The sweet, tranquil face of the portrait was ever present before her mental vision. She felt it to be her mission, in these dark days of misfortune, to reunite these strangely separated lives. Obstacles were in her way, but some day she would be able to overcome them. She did not know the name or address of the lady. She was not quite certain whether she were Mr. Armitage's wife or sweetheart, although the presumption was that they were married, as in the days of his prosperity there could have been no possible reason for procrastination or delay. Moreover, men were not wont to speak of their fiancées with the perfect candor Armitage had exhibited in alluding to this lady.

Meantime the two, brother and sister, kept a closer espionage over the blind man than they would have had him know, and remembered him with every little attention in their power.

CHAPTER XLIII

CROSS PURPOSES

One day Armitage presented himself at the cottage door.

"Miss Amy, will you be kind enough to supply me with writing materials? There is a letter I must send."

The girl's quick intuition at once divined the character of this communication.

"Mr. Armitage, are you going to tell her?"

"Not yet. Oh, not yet. But I must write."

Her heart ached for him, as she read back of his words a painful shrinking from confiding the full measure of his misfortune to the woman he loved.

She gave him a seat at her little writing-desk, and placing paper and pencil before him, stood at a little distance and saw him form the first awkward words, guiding his hand by means of a book laid across the paper above the line he essayed to follow. Not for the world would she have deciphered the words in which he disguised the awful tragedy that had overtaken him, or, confessing it at length without reserve, resigned his life's dearest hopes.

For a while she waited, and thus it came that she was a witness of the agonized struggle which ensued. She saw him stop and bow his head

upon the desk-lid, his hands clenched, his whole attitude one of profound despair. When she could bear the sight no longer, she noiselessly left the room.

Oh, cruel world, that ranked each man and woman by the little measure of worldly success achieved in selfish greed, and counted as nothing the unseen sacrifices that resulted in disaster and loss! Cruel civilization, which bound its coronets upon undeserving brows, and left its grandest heroes to tread the by-paths of poverty and despair, and to sleep, at length, in unmarked and forgotten graves!

And she, the beautiful, gifted woman, whom he so worshiped, and in whom his life was so bound up, that to lose her meant more than the bitterness of death, — what manner of woman was she, who could be only a fair-weather friend, and from whom he would fain conceal the dire misfortune that had befallen him?

More generous thoughts forced themselves upon the girl. The face was always before her. Mr. Armitage was mistaken. Men rarely understood a woman's heart, or were capable of measuring its depths of devotion, of loyalty and sympathy. She recalled the high nobility of the countenance, the exquisite tenderness of brow and eyes and lips. Beneath the pride and gayety and possible crust of worldly ambition, there existed a royal capacity for self-sacrifice. Gracious, elegant woman and society queen that she divined the original of the portrait to be, who could tell but that she might find a happiness better and sweeter than any social triumph

in ministering to the wants of the stricken man, and in bringing consolation to his sore heart?

An hour later Armitage placed the letter in her hand.

"Will you address it? I 'm afraid to trust my wavering hand on an envelope."

He dictated the address: "Mrs. Paul Armitage, No. — —— St., Boston, Mass."

The girl wrote the superscription clearly and neatly, a definite plan forming in her mind. Fate had at last placed opportunity in her hands, and she meant to avail herself of it. She did not seal the envelope when she had finished, but laid it on the little cabinet where they were accustomed to place their mail, awaiting Rob's next trip to the village.

That night another inclosure was slipped within this envelope; it was simple and direct, and read as follows: —

Dear Mrs. Armitage, — I think it is only right you should know of the terrible calamity that has come upon Mr. Armitage, and of which I am sure he is trying to spare you all knowledge. He is blind. His eyesight was offered up in noble self-sacrifice for a friend. Because the man he saved is near and dear to me, it seems to me proper that I should send you this intelligence.

Sadder even than his helplessness is the cloud of sorrow and despondence in which he seems to be perpetually wrapped. I know he is constantly thinking of you and longing for your presence, for he

often takes your portrait, which he cannot see, in his hands, and when he sits alone, he is always fingering the little charm on his watch-chain which holds your likeness.

Faithfully yours,

AMY JUDITH.

CHAPTER XLIV

BOHEMIANS TO THE RESCUE

When the news of Armitage's affliction traveled up to San Francisco, it aroused in his old comrades that quick and unreckoning sympathy characteristic of the true Bohemian.

"Blind — blind and penniless! Think of it, boys! Harmon says he has next to nothing in the world. All the money he paid him for the painting he ruined his eyes over went to pay off some old debt. Blind and alone; living up a mountain cañon! It 's an awful situation, boys! We 've got to do something for him, and right away."

Bohemia is by instinct gregarious. She cannot understand the beauties of solitude. Separation from the bustle and action of the city, the extravagance and mirth of club-life, the gay companionship of kindred souls, means to her something only a shade less gruesome than the awful solitude of the grave.

"We must have him down here at once, boys! that 's sure!" cried Jack Pryor, who had once been a tenant by courtesy of Armitage's studio, when turned out of his own by reason of a disagreement with a presumptuous and unreasonable landlord, who wanted his rent, twelve months overdue.

"But how can we manage it? We can't get him here unless he has something to live upon. Armitage would cut his throat before he 'd eat the bread of charity."

"How would it do to try to railroad a bill through Congress granting him an extra allowance for the painting, on account of what it has cost him?"

"Aw, Congress! Lots of sympathy for art in Congress, is n't there? We 'd stand a better chance of getting a group of gilded sea-lions placed on the dome of the national Capitol than to ask Congress for an appropriation for such a purpose. I happen to know that Harmon rolled logs with a New England member to get that commission for Armitage, — voted an allowance for a fog-horn to be run by the distinguished member's nephew, or something of the kind, else he 'd never have secured the job for Armitage!" shamefully asserted another of the party, a foreigner, who had not a proper respect for American institutions.

"And our government, which pensions off its schoolma'ams and soldiers, one class at least being provided all their lives with ample salaries to save a competency from during their years of usefulness, has nothing to award the men who bring the highest distinction on the nation and get the least for it," bitterly remarked an old painter, who had for years battled to keep the wolf from his door and yet remain true to the highest ideals of his profession, and who saw old age and destitution approaching.

"Oh, that 's as you look at it," smartly replied young Potboiler. "I don't seem to have any trouble to get along."

"Armitage has a most picturesque head. He 'd be a fine subject for an ideal study of the blind Saul. I could make no end of use of him," said a young portrait painter, Mortimer by name.

"Armitage — a model! You need to have a hole punched in your head, Mortimer, to let some sense in," blandly remarked another.

"Oh, let up, boys!" put in Pryor. "As Armitage won't accept help, there 's no use talking about an appeal to the government, or getting up a benefit sale, or anything of that sort. We 've got to devise some plan we can work without any affront to his feelings or his dignity."

"If it were anything but his eyes!" groaned Rathburn, a portrait painter of distinction, who had been abroad with Armitage, and who had been deeply affected by the tidings of his old friend's calamity. "If he 'd only been crippled for life, or his hands disabled, or his health failed, he could lie on a sofa and talk and give us ideas, and be no end of help to everybody! Armitage loves his art, and he 's scintillating with brilliant thoughts and suggestions. Ruskin was n't a circumstance to him. But blind!"

Pryor's face had brightened during this speech. He tossed his cigar into a basket, where it began to smoulder in a little nest of burnt paper, promising to kindle a fine blaze when the men should have gone and the studio be deserted.

"Boys, I have an idea!"

"Oh, oh, Pryor 's captured an idea! Put your finger on it, Pryor!" "An epoch in Jack's life,

boys!" were some of the sarcastic sallies that greeted this announcement. One of the young men slyly blew a police-whistle out of the window, quickly retreating before the gaze of people on the street below could travel up to the sixth story, in which Rathburn's sky parlor was situated.

"That policeman 's never on his beat when he 's needed. If he 'd been in his proper place, I 'd have had him come up and arrest it!" he explained to the reckless crowd.

Pryor waited with perfect unconcern until the storm of badinage subsided. Then he unfolded his idea, which was hailed with approval by the caucus.

A few days later, two young men clad in well-worn corduroys, and looking like a pair of disreputable fishermen on a bootless expedition, accosted Amy Judith as she stood beneath the tree which sheltered her mountain home.

"Beg pardon," said one of the young men affably, doffing his cap, and sending a curious glance aloft, "would you be so kind as to direct us to Mr. Armitage's place?"

Miss Judith gave him the desired information.

"Stunning little woman!" remarked Mortimer. "Wonder if I could get a sketch of her through the trees! And did you see that little summer-house up in the tree?"

"Oh, come along! Do leave shop at home for once," angrily muttered Pryor, hurrying him along their way.

Amy Judith felt when she saw these visitors that their advent boded change for Paul Armitage, and

she followed them wistfully with her eyes, until they were lost to sight around a bend of the path.

Some doubts had been felt by Armitage's old comrades as to the advisability of sending Mortimer along on this commission, on account of his proverbial lack of tact. It was current rumor that he had once forfeited a thousand-dollar commission for painting the daughter of one of the bonanza kings, through garnishing the portrait, with deplorable fidelity to nature, with a large wart which formed a questionable embellishment to the young lady's nose. Could his friends have witnessed the interview which followed, they would have realized that their misgivings were not ill founded.

The visitors found Armitage standing in his corral, feeding a bit of green clover to his mare, the one living companion he possessed of whose affection he had constant and unquestionable demonstration. The animal whinnied softly as her master turned away, detecting the sound of footfalls and waiting for his visitors to announce themselves.

Unchanged in every respect save that fixed expression of his eyes which seemed ever waiting for some divine touch to unseal their inner chambers, his pathetic attitude of listening and waiting was too much for Mortimer, who blubbered like a schoolboy, struggling valiantly to keep any sound of his grief from reaching the blind man's sensitive ears.

Pryor's heart was no less moved, but he went cheerily forward.

"Armitage, I 'm glad to find you!"

"Is it Jack Pryor? Well, this is a pleasure, Jack. Who 's with you?"

Mortimer contrived to come forward and take Armitage's hand, murmuring a few words of conventional greeting.

"Out on a sketching-trip, boys?"

"Well, not exactly. Of course we make a scrawl now and then. But we 're up here to see you."

"Lovely pictures you have in these hills, Mr. Armitage," said Mortimer, rallying his spirits and speaking jauntily. "Just look at that oak over there by the stream now! Where the sun strikes it, it throws real purple shadows on the grass, Van Antwerp and the other fellows to the contrary, eh? Don't you agree with me?"

Pryor nudged Mortimer sharply. He could have kicked him with a better grace.

"Take us some place where we can sit down, Armitage. We have a proposition to make to you," said Pryor, noting that the blind man was evidently accustomed to find his way about alone, and rightly judging that he would take pride in demonstrating his independence of movement.

Armitage led the way to the cabin, chatting easily and pleasantly of old friends and old associations, and thirstily drinking down the studio gossip with which the two men regaled him on the way. He seated his visitors in his large living-room. Mortimer's eyes, wandering down the gay perspective to the forlorn space at the room's extremity, no longer concealed by the black drapery, where the unused easel stood, relapsed into tears.

"Now, Armitage," began Pryor, casting a withering look upon his fellow artist, "it 's just this

way. We need you up in San Francisco. You know you always were a sort of balance-wheel and corrective to us all, keeping us true to the best principles of art, or at least preventing our going far astray. Since you 've been away, we 're all at sixes and sevens. The fellows are running to all sorts of fads. Some of their work would make you sick."

Pryor had carefully avoided all reference to the misfortune which had descended upon his old friend, and which might render this proposal welcome to him. But in avoiding Scylla, he had unwittingly steered against Charybdis.

Mortimer tipped him a vengeful nod, as one who realized and rejoiced in another's misstep.

"Such things are not serious," remarked Armitage calmly. "To go astray and come back to the fold is often an essential process of growth."

"But to keep in the straight path and never go astray takes a man ahead faster and surer," asserted Jack tranquilly. "Fact is, we 've been talking it over, some of us fellows, and we 've come to the conclusion we want you as a sort of shepherd. You — you have n't any engagement or plan in prospect that would prevent your coming to us, have you?"

"I have a sort of plan. I could scarcely dignify it by the title of 'engagement.' It is n't matured yet. But go ahead and let me hear what you have to say. In what capacity do you want me to serve as shepherd, Jack? To reach out a pole and crook, catch the lambs that are straying, and hustle them

back to the fold? Or merely to herd the old sheep, keep them together, fat and hearty, and see that they do not graze in strange pastures or eat what is n't good for them? Explain yourself fully, Jack!"

"Well, I suppose that 's about it," said Pryor, wishing to heaven that he had never been betrayed into that awkward metaphor of the lambs and the shepherd, and trying with all his might to escape from it. "In other words, if you 'd just come back and accept quarters among us, and give us your ideas on art, either in the form of private talks or open lectures, — there need n't be anything formal about them, — we 'd be no end obliged. You know men are living by that very sort of thing, and reaping distinction, in Munich and Vienna and Paris, and all the art centres abroad."

"*Blind men?*"

"Now, Armitage, the question of sight does n't enter into the matter at all. You *have* seen, and you *have* painted, and you 've got all the technique at your fingers' end, for that matter. What we want is the benefit of your experience and your ideas."

"In other words, if a question of color or of treatment or of motive arises; if a new art school comes to town or a new fad develops, or some poor fellow is trying to free himself from a mannerism or find his true leading, you want me to keep on promulgating the high and lofty abstract principles of art. When the poor devils are dying for want of water, I 'm to offer them a drop of oil."

"You don't look at it the right way, Armitage."

"I 'm afraid it is you who won't look at it the right way, Pryor. I appreciate the kindness that prompts this offer, but I believe I prefer brooms."

"What 's that?" asked Mortimer.

"Brooms. Have n't you heard of that institution where men who have lost their sight make themselves useful by manufacturing hand-made brooms? I believe the establishment is supposed to draw state aid, but it 's really self-supporting through this admirable industry of its inmates, who thus retain their self-respect. Very good brooms they make, I 'm told. I 've been practicing. As a preliminary, I 've dissected two old brooms."

"But, Mr. Armitage, we were going to pay you a salary, — a good round salary! Every one of us was going to chip in," put in Mortimer. Jack Pryor wished he had murdered him before starting on this journey, as he had been tempted to do in San Francisco.

"Thank you, Mortimer. I think making brooms would be more respectable."

"Armitage, don't be hasty in deciding. It 's going to be an awful disappointment to us. Why won't you try it for a month, say? I think you could demonstrate to yourself that the position was no mere sinecure, but one of genuine usefulness," urged Jack, in desperation.

"Thank you, Jack. I 'll think it over. It strikes me that it would be a good test case to take the scheme direct to the Blind Men's Industrial Home, and make it the feature of some public entertain-

ment. I 'm obliged to you for the suggestion. It may be that the populace would rise in force to hear a blind man instruct them on art. And if there should be a hearty, genuine outpouring at so much a head, I promise you I 'll take to the platform at once. It 's certainly a unique idea!"

"I 'd rather be shot than go back and tell them you won't come," said Pryor dejectedly.

He might have added, with truth, that Mortimer would certainly come to his death at the hands of a mob of infuriated Bohemians, should they be enlightened as to the manner in which he had aided their mutual errand.

CHAPTER XLV

THE WOMAN OF THE PORTRAIT

Amy Judith had not expected any answer to the pitiful little note she had slipped into Mr. Armitage's letter to the unknown woman who exerted so strong an influence over his life, but a couple of weeks later a letter came to her, addressed in delicate feminine penmanship. It was very brief, and read: —

Dear Miss Judith, — I shall take Tuesday's train for the coast, reaching the Vernal Hills on Sunday the — inst.

When I see you, I shall try to express the gratitude I feel for your confidence that I would rather be acquainted with the full measure of Paul's misfortune, than to be left in ignorance of it. Oh, these men! Paul is one of the best and truest, but how little they understand our women's hearts!

Your friend,

Mary Armitage.

All the remainder of that week Amy Judith went about with a conscience heavy burdened, oddly silent and reticent when she met Armitage, and escaping from his society on every possible excuse.

In spite of these chill and varying moods, she surprised him by inviting him to dinner on the following Sunday.

Armitage accepted the invitation with alacrity. The wood-chopper's wife had not proved a success as a caterer, and his meals were neither well cooked nor agreeably served. Amy, however, repented the invitation as soon as she had framed it, as she bethought herself of the embarrassments that might arise, and reflected that it would have been far more considerate to have permitted these two, so long apart, to enjoy their reunion, with all its possible explanations and mutual confessions, in the seclusion of their cañon home.

On the appointed day, the fateful Sabbath, Armitage came to the cottage early, so early that Amy was obliged to excuse herself to give Rob directions to drive at once to the station to meet the afternoon train.

"I 'm expecting a friend — a lady, Rob."

"And never told me!" The boy's tone was aggrieved. "Why did you make a secret of it, Amy?"

"Rob, it is — Mrs. Armitage."

"Mrs. Armitage!" Rob gave a long whistle.

"Yes. Please don't ask a word. Only be sure to get there in time, and be very nice to her."

Miss Judith was so absent-minded that afternoon, and made such random replies to her visitor, that he began to feel very uncomfortable. She had decided that before the traveler arrived she must have a little talk with Armitage, and tell him what she

had done, but she heard the train whistle and pass the station before she could muster courage for it.

"Mr. Armitage," she said hastily, breaking in upon a remark of his concerning the weather.

"Yes, Miss Amy?"

He lifted his head with a startled expression, impressed by her serious tone.

"I cannot help seeing how lonely you are, and I have decided that you must have — her — come."

"I would n't suggest such a thing to her for the world," interposed Armitage positively.

"Are you afraid she would n't be contented?"

"That is n't the question. You don't understand. She has always lived — well, not exactly in affluence, but she has been used to every comfort and attention. She has never known privation of any kind. She would probably come if I asked her. She might not repine. It is I who would be miserable over her discomforts. How could I bear to know she was rasped by all manner of little discomforts, burdened with cares I was powerless to lift, secretly pining for her old home, her accustomed surroundings and associates?"

"And you think a woman who truly loves a man could ever reckon the trifles you speak of?"

"It is the man whose duty it is to reckon, to be foresighted."

"Mr. Armitage, you cannot change matters now. I wrote her myself. She is coming. She has come on this very train. Rob has gone to meet her. I can hear the wheels now."

"Impossible!" he cried, but she could see the

look of boyish pleasure that leaped into his face, brightening all his features, — a look that not all her attention or devotion had ever called forth.

"And one word more, Mr. Armitage. You made this great sacrifice for us — for Rob and me," said Amy Judith humbly. "There is just one thing for us to do. We will go away and resign all claim to the land, leave it all to you and your wife."

"My wife!" exclaimed Paul Armitage, and he sprang from his chair and took a step forward in the darkness, groping in the direction of her vanishing footsteps. But he heard the clatter of horse's hoofs, the rattle of wheels, Rob's gay young voice, and another, whose dear accents he had not heard for many weary years.

Amy Judith had intended to go calmly forward and welcome the new-comer with a dignity befitting her part of hostess. She had even a carefully prepared little speech with which she had meant to greet her; but now, as she saw Rob handing down a slender veiled figure, smitten with a sudden sense of anguish and desolation, she turned and fled up the mountain side, anywhere, anywhere, out of sight and sound of that reunion which she suddenly discovered it was beyond her strength to witness.

CHAPTER XLVI

"THE DEAREST WOMAN IN THE WORLD"

THE lady who descended from the cart was tall and slender, and wore her dusty traveling-garments with a stately grace. She hastened to where the tall man waited, incredulous expectation in his face.

"Oh, Paul, Paul!"

With sobs and inarticulate murmurs of endearment she hung upon him, pressing kisses upon the sightless eyes, whispering tender reproaches in his ears, pouring out upon him the pent-up love and tenderness of years.

"And you would not tell me!" she cried in gentle reproof. "You would have left me in ignorance of your trouble. Oh, Paul, to think that I might never have known, if it had not been for her, — for this dear Amy Judith."

"It seemed so cruel!" he said brokenly. "Now, when you most needed my support and care, my poor, precious, neglected" —

"Hush, dear! No hardship that enters a woman's life can be half so bitter as to be refused the right to share the misfortunes and sorrows of one dear to her."

A silence fell between them, — a silence instinct with that perfect trust which casts out doubt, outlasts life, and is more powerful than the grave.

"Where is Amy, Paul?" she at length asked. "I must see her."

"She was here only a moment ago," replied the young man. "I was speaking with her as you came. I supposed she went to meet you."

"I certainly had a glimpse of her standing in the door as we drove up," said the lady softly. "It was only a passing look, Paul, but I am sure I never saw so beautiful a little creature in all my life."

Paul Armitage made no reply to this enthusiastic speech, but he pressed the hand which held his own.

When Amy Judith fled like a frightened child from her little home at the approach of her stranger guest, she instinctively avoided all accustomed paths, and turned in the direction of a barren, untraveled hillside. One hand she held pressed closely against her throat, as if to stifle the flood of anguish rising there, and with the other she beat back the thorny boughs which seemed to reach out a thousand prickly arms to mock at her and detain her.

"Amy! Amy Judith!"

Rob, who had observed the direction in which she had gone, followed after, and came upon her seated on a stone amid a dreary waste of rock and sagebrush, her face as dull and expressionless as the bleak prospect upon which her eyes were fixed.

"Amy! They are calling you!" said Rob, coming to her side.

The look in her face startled him.

"Why, Amy, it can't be possible that you dread meeting her. She 's so pleasant and kind I feel as

if I 'd known her all my life. And she 's so anxious to know you. She talked about you half the way."

So even Rob had gone over to the enemy. Amy felt as if she had no place left in the world, but she passively rose and set her face homeward, feeling that of all the hard ordeals of her life, the most crucial was at hand. With feminine inconsistency, she decided that she would rather endure the sorest trial than to welcome to their peaceful retreat this new and alien element, or to submit herself to the inspection of Paul Armitage's wife.

Clad in some misty gray fabric, her fragile beauty seemed to take on a new and spiritual meaning as she halted on the threshold, shyly viewing the two who awaited her.

Paul Armitage was holding the lady's hand in his own, but he was leaning forward, intently listening to her step, and she could see that, no matter how dear this new-comer, in his heart a deathless affection hungered for her presence.

The girl's eyes wandered to the woman by his side. She saw the face of the portrait, sweeter and lovelier, though years had passed over it, leaving their snows on the bands of shining dark hair, now silvery white, and the hand that Armitage held was shrunken and wrinkled.

"Miss Amy," he said, rising as she came slowly to them, "I want you to know the dearest woman in the whole world, — my mother!"

One moment the two women looked into each other's eyes, the girl's questioning and amazed, the

elder lady's gentle and loving; then Amy Judith, softly sobbing, was gathered in the motherly arms.

Paul Armitage put out his hand and groped for Amy's fair head, laying it softly there.

"You are blinder than I, Amy!" he said under his breath, and passed away, leaving the two women together.

It was the portrait of the mother, taken in early youth and gowned after the fashion of forty years before, strangely reproduced in the fashions of the day, which Amy Judith had seen, and whose likeness had been burned upon her brain, calling forth fantastic visions in her fever and delirium, — the loving mother whom Paul Armitage, with a son's loyalty, had enshrined in his heart, and who had throughout life been his guiding star, holding him aloof from the temptations and allurements that had beset his path.

CHAPTER XLVII

AMY JUDITH'S OPPORTUNITY

To Amy Judith, so long denied a mother's love, there was something inexpressibly sweet in close daily association with this generous, bountiful womanly nature, which, like a hovering dove, took her under its sheltering wing.

From the first, the tenderest sympathy existed between the two women so strangely brought together, but a time soon came when even this affectionate regard entailed its measure of pain upon them.

"When Poverty knocks at the door, Love flies out of the window," is a proverb so trite that it would long ago have been retired in company with other time-worn saws, were it not that we see it so constantly and painfully exemplified in the lives of people around us.

When life becomes a stern struggle for the means of existence, there is little leisure for sentiment. Groveling care was pressing closely about these dwellers in the Vernal Hills, and a consuming anxiety drove content from their hearths and took up its abode beside them.

As the year wore on, Amy Judith saw Rob laying down youth and hope under the pressure of more

than a man's work. She saw Paul Armitage's prediction verified, and his aged mother bowed under her new weight of care, while her delicate hands were growing calloused with unaccustomed drudgery. She saw a deeper shade of melancholy driving the transient cheer from the blind man's face, and felt that by her own ill-considered act she had added to his burden of anxiety.

One by one little luxuries were banished from their tables; one by one they dispensed with accustomed comforts, and all the while debt was accumulating, a living horror to the two women, in whose daily greetings the recognition of threatening distress became a dumb appeal, a piteous entreaty.

One day Amy Judith received an unexpected visitor in her eyrie.

"I did not know that you were within a thousand miles of here, Senator Harmon," she said. "Mr. Armitage will be so gratified to see you."

"I did not come to see Armitage this time," was the quiet reply.

When Jasper Harmon went on to the national capital, he had by no means passed out of the lives of the dwellers on Escondido Creek. From time to time letters and little remembrances had borne witness that not even the cares of State could banish them from his mind; but while he had never flagged in his faithful consideration for Armitage, his letters became more and more of a personal appeal to the woman to whom they were addressed, and the time came when Armitage became conscious of long passages left unread, although he could not see the

pretty flush that mantled the girl's cheek as her eyes roved over them.

Another national campaign was approaching, and again the papers were busily coupling Harmon's name with the high office to which it had long been known he honorably aspired.

His two memories of Amy Judith, one as a fair girl, thrilling all hearts and prepared to capture a world's adoration with her marvelous gift of song, the other as a lovely, well-poised woman, accepting her homely tasks with a gracious humility, bearing disappointment with a noble patience, had made an impression upon the invincible old bachelor such as no brilliant society belle had ever succeeded in producing. He began his wooing in a way characteristic of the man.

"Miss Judith, the world does me the honor to call me a successful man. In reality, my life is blank and lonely. I 'm afraid I have not much to offer you that you care for, but if you will consent to be my wife, all I have shall be laid at your feet, and it will be the first object of my life to secure your happiness."

"Marriage cannot be a question of worldly goods," began the girl, with heightened color.

"I beg your pardon for so much as alluding to them," returned Harmon humbly, but inwardly pleased at the girl's original manner of receiving a proposal which all the other marriageable women of his acquaintance would have accepted with smiles and blushes. Egad! How he would enjoy confusing some old diplomats of his acquaintance with her simple, direct ways!

"Then, if a lifetime of devotion" —

"Senator Harmon, please stop right there!" interposed the girl eagerly. "It cannot be. To discuss it would only be to spoil our friendship."

"But I cannot give you up like this, little woman!" cried Harmon, and forthwith surprised himself and frightened the girl with the vehemence of his wooing. He had never been an insincere or hypocritical man; he had known broad sympathies and loyal friendships, had generously espoused the cause of the weak, and had been a diligent and incorruptible public servant; but hitherto he had dwelt only in the shallows of existence. For the first time he found himself struggling in the deeps, all his suavity and ready wit gone, powerless to express the sentiments that overpowered him. He, who had bent great assemblies to his will, who had influenced legislation by the force of his eloquence and logic, found himself unable to sway the decision of this one small woman.

"How can I endure to give you up?" he cried passionately; "to see you going on year after year, discharging the most menial drudgery, bowing and aging under your homely cares! If you had preserved your voice, you might have shaped your life as you chose. But to go on climbing this treadmill of care, — I cannot bear it!"

"It is good to climb, although it be nothing but a treadmill!" said the girl quaintly. "And some day the treadmill may travel to the mountain top, and all things are possible to those who reach the heights after a long and weary climb."

Was there a mysterious meaning in her words? A happy smile played about her lips for one brief instant and then faded, leaving only a look of sweet seriousness.

The senator took up his hat. The battle was over, and he was too good a general not to recognize defeat.

"Good-by! Give my regards to Armitage, and do not quite forget me, little woman, when you have reached the heights. Remember that I would have liked to smooth your pathway."

She held out her hand, and he saw the first evidence of kindly feeling in her moist eyes, but there was no recall in her glance, and he passed down the mountain and out of her life.

Although Harmon, on this occasion, had left his private car behind and traveled in the modesty of a private citizen, it is not to be supposed that so distinguished a man could make a movement that was not ferreted out by the sharp eyes of the daily press and made the subject of curious speculation. Various rumors were current concerning his visit, one being that the national government had determined to establish a mammoth zoölogical garden in the Vernal Hills, and that Harmon had visited the district to investigate its climate and facilities and to report upon them. Another accredited the senator himself with the intention of investing in a large tract for the cultivation of semi-tropical fruits. Local citizens, acquainted with the fact of his former visit to Armitage, ascribed his present flying trip to the same purpose, and thus it happened

that friendly inquiry brought to the blind man knowledge of his friend's recent proximity, and he was left to form his own conclusions as to the purpose of Harmon's visit.

The blind have little to divert their minds from a steadfast chronicle of the events which come within the circle of their experience. Hence it was that Armitage was afterwards enabled to date back to the time of Harmon's visit the beginning of certain mysterious behavior of Amy Judith's, and to draw his own conclusions as to its meaning.

CHAPTER XLVIII

RENUNCIATION

"MOTHER, she is tiring of it all."

"Amy Judith?"

"Yes, Amy. To expect her to be forever reconciled to this life of toil and privation would be to expect some wild, free bird of the woods to be blithe and gay, shut up in a rusty cage."

Mrs. Armitage had noted Amy's odd restlessness, her growing indifference to household cares which she had formerly conscientiously performed, even her neglect of little attentions hitherto faithfully rendered Armitage, many of them under his protest.

"She is so young!" the mother said, with a sigh.

"It is only natural she should grow impatient," said Armitage sadly. "To expect otherwise would be an injustice to her youth. We could not hope to keep her here forever. To do so would be to defraud her of youth's rightful heritage, of congenial companionship adapted to her years, of cheerful surroundings, of all the little diversions that lighten life and rob it of dull care. In her tenderness of heart she might have been ready to make the sacrifice. I gave her up when this came upon me, mother."

"Oh, Paul, Paul!"

She bowed her head above him, and a tear, an old woman's bitter, hard-wrung tear, fell on his brown hair.

After a little pause Armitage went on cheerfully: —

"Harmon was up here a month ago, mother. He came to see her alone. There is only one explanation for his visit. And it is since then that she has taken to these solitary walks in the hills. She is rarely at home. She comes here at longer and longer intervals. What answer she gave him I do not know, but a man like Harmon should command any woman's love, and sooner or later he will win. He is a splendid fellow, well worthy of her."

At this instant Amy Judith called out a gay little greeting, on her way up the mountain trail. Her face was sparkling, her voice joyous, and her step light and free. The mother sighed as she turned from the bonny girl to her son, depressed, disconsolate, aging before he had reached his prime.

The sound of the blithe young voice was a stimulus to Armitage. He rose from his chair, shaking off the melancholy that weighed him down, as if it had been a cumbrous garment, to be flung off at pleasure.

"I shall look backward no more, mother, nor burden myself with useless regrets. I am still a strong man, and must sustain my part in life. If one sense has been taken from me, that is all the more reason why I should make the most of what

is left. I have brains, a good education, some proficiency as a linguist, and a fund of reminiscence that will grow more valuable as the years go by. I have no doubt I might negotiate a magazine article or so about art study abroad. First of all, I must get back to the city, where I can employ my abilities to the best advantage. You shall go with me, mother, and we will scandalize Bohemia by setting up a bit of New England housekeeping in her midst."

"Could n't you be content to live on here, Paul?" asked the mother wistfully, for she dreaded change with the sensitiveness of age, which finds its sorest trial in conforming to new conditions and new surroundings.

"Here! — where every step I take would remind me of the happiness I had lost!" said Armitage sadly. "I should go mad. My only salvation is in finding new surroundings, new interests. There is not a rock or tree around here that is not in some way associated with her, mother. The very breeze that blows would bring memories of her. I must go where I can forget."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Rob, breathless with haste and excitement.

"They are going to make the survey of the land at last!" he cried. "I saw Fowler down at the station. He is to run the lines, and he told me to tell you that as soon as he has finished, the plat will be placed in the Receiver's office. It will be necessary to file as soon as that is done."

Armitage listened to this announcement without concern.

"I shall be glad to have Fowler up here," he said quietly. "But I am no longer interested in the filing."

"But we want you to file upon it!" insisted Rob firmly. "Amy will never touch it, and if you don't enter the tract, some one else will be sure to file when the sixty days' limit has expired."

"Then file upon it yourself, Rob. I hereby relinquish every claim I may have, in your favor, and make you a free gift of my improvements. I could not comply with the law's requirements. A homestead claim demands constant residence, and I am going away."

The very earth seemed to collapse under Rob's feet with this intelligence. He succeeded in controlling his voice and shakily asking: —

"Where?"

"Back to the city, Rob. I am beginning to realize that I may find a field of usefulness up there. Some of my brother artists made me an offer last spring, which appeared to me rather absurd at the time, but now I 'm thinking seriously of accepting it, with modifications."

Rob fumbled with some books lying on the table beside him, then bent for a close examination of the Japanese throne-chair, one of whose joints was getting weak.

"Have you told Amy?" he asked at length.

"Not yet."

"I think you ought."

Could Armitage have seen the boy's frank face, he would have read there the tokens of a secret

which was growing altogether too weighty for the boy's keeping.

"I am going to tell her now," said Armitage, reaching for his hat and stick.

The hard toil and heavy cares of the past two years had hastened Rob's development. Stalwart of figure and earnest of countenance, his boyhood's error had become the strength of his manhood, steeling him against temptation, teaching him a gentle humility, and at the same time instilling in his heart broad charity and sympathy for others, which invested an originally arbitrary and self-sufficient nature with a rarely winning personality.

He made no further remark, but silently waited, while Armitage passed out of the door, and in the direction the girl had gone, walking with a free, firm stride along the accustomed path. Soon he disappeared from sight in the windings of the gulch, but Rob, eagerly watching, saw him reappear, climbing the steep trail leading to the summit of the range. Mrs. Armitage joined him, looking over his shoulder.

"He goes about so fearlessly," she said anxiously, "and in places where I would not dare trust myself if I had a dozen pairs of eyes. But he enjoys it so, I do not like to discourage him. He has never gone so far before. Do you think it is safe?" she asked the boy, wistfully following the dark figure silhouetted against the tawny brown of the hills.

"Perfectly safe!" Rob assured her, with the happy security of youth. Then a sudden recollection smote him.

"Oh, the washout, — the washout that carried away the trail last spring!" he cried, in horror. "I don't believe he knows! And he 's already so far up! God help him! God help me!"

The boy flung himself out of the door, tearing off his coat as he ran. Mrs. Armitage, dimly comprehending the threatening danger, followed after, a wan and pathetic figure, tottering along the rugged path, with gray hair flying, and before her eyes the awful spectacle of the dread abyss toward which the blind man's feet were so unconsciously walking.

CHAPTER XLIX

LIGHT IN DARKNESS

Unconscious of threatening danger, Armitage swung himself along the mountain trail, drinking in new strength with every breath. The loss of one faculty seemed to have increased the delicacy and keenness of his remaining senses, and although he could no longer see the many tinted blossoms and rich green verdure that lined his path, their subtle fragrance flowed like a cordial through his veins.

His ear was no less finely attuned to every sound that thrilled the solitudes. The sweet calls of birds and their happy songs, the hum of insects, the tinkling of distant rills, the murmur of the wind that sighed down the cañon, seemed to him to blend with innumerable minor cadences, to which common ears were deaf, — the soft movements of growing plants, the stir of the sap as it quickened the bare boughs, — all uniting to form a glorious anthem, nature's own choral harmony.

To-day he seemed to hear at intervals a new note in this great song. He bent his head, listening intently. Somewhere, far up in the hills, there was a burst of melody swelling in full, liquid notes, falling away in a cadence clear and sweet as the song of the hermit thrush, then sporting itself in

a series of playful trills. The very birds seemed to hush their songs in the thickets, hearkening to this wonderful human Voice exulting its power in the high altitude.

Armitage pressed eagerly on in the direction of the Voice, his head uplifted and thrown back, his soul going out in joyous greeting to the singer who had finished the long and rugged climb and stood triumphant on the heights.

He was coming now to the one perilous part of the trail, and he remembered the slender path running like a thread along the face of a perpendicular wall of earth and stone, and the great boulder midway, where a narrow shelf of rock afforded a slight but firm footing. What he did not know was that the big stone, dislodged by the heavy rains of the preceding season, was lying at the bottom of the gulch, and that the mountaineers had made a new trail around and above this point, unwilling to trust their sure-footed pack-animals to its passage, with a caving cliff of earth and rock above and a fall of a thousand feet below.

The Voice was nearer now, but blending with it and producing strange confusion and discord, he seemed to hear a chorus of cries from the trail below, — terrified, warning voices, calling out in entreaty and pain. Once he halted for an instant and listened, but more distinct in his ear was the soft flutter of a frightened bird, darting from her nest in a thorn-tree, the rush of wings as she crossed his path, the cheery, reassuring call of her mate from a neighboring thicket, the low cry of the nestlings clamoring for food.

He was on the narrow trail now, and he walked with more caution, touching the bank on his right with his stick, knowing perfect security demanded that he should keep close to this inner wall.

A turn of the trail brought him to the slope on the summit of which the Singer stood.

The Voice was only a little further on. He could hear the words of the gay song it caroled, the happy, care-free song, telling that from the Singer's life the clouds had rolled away, and henceforth her path lay in the clear sunshine amid the plaudits of all human-kind.

How the melody soared out upon the air, inspiring, exulting, rejoicing in its own strength and sweetness. His heart was lifted up by the music, and his soul climbed the heights where the Singer stood, unconscious of his coming, reveling in her gift, waking the echoes of the hills, which seemed to follow her like some divine refrain.

He was nearing the washout now. A few more steps and he would reach the brink of the chasm, and Death would be upon him with a thunderous rush and roar and a yawning sepulchre in the depths of the deep fissure. Oh, that some Divine hand might be outstretched to warn and save him!

And now the song suddenly faltered and died away. Armitage pressed on, but his face grew bewildered, and he walked like a man in a dream, disappointment and discouragement growing with every step.

The Singer had seen him treading the abandoned trail, walking unawares into deadly peril, and her

heart semed to die within her at the sight. To disturb him by a cry of warning would be to seal his doom. There seemed no hope for any human help or intervention. For an instant the mountains seemed to reel about her, the sunshine was blotted out, and all the world grew dim before her eyes.

Then suddenly she rallied all her strength and forced herself to think clearly and quickly. Only instant and intelligent action might save him. There was no longer chance for him to halt or turn back. Already the broken earth was almost beneath his feet. Hesitation meant destruction of his only hope, and in another moment he might be pausing, indecisive, hearkening again for the Voice which had been his beacon in the darkness.

Solemn and sweet and slow, swelling with new power and majesty, the Voice arose in Haydn's mighty anthem, "The heavens are telling the glory of God."

Armitage had reached the break in the trail. His stick, extended to tap the wall at his right, dislodged a shower of loose dirt and stones which rattled down the abyss, carrying others with them and making a thunderous din in the gulch below. The ground was crumbling beneath his feet, his staff touched nothing before.

The Singer was on her knees now, her hands clasped, staring in agony before her. Her white lips could scarce shape the words of the anthem, but the Voice still rose, calm, majestic, uplifting, "The wonder of his work proclaims the firmament."

The strong, solemn melody seemed to sustain and

uplift Armitage even as the stars draw men's souls upward. A moment's indecision, an instant of panic or uncertainty, and he would have been lost, but even as he felt the ground crumbling beneath his feet he rested his hand lightly on the crumbling bank, and swinging himself forward with a great spring landed on firm ground on the trail beyond the break.

"Safe!" shouted Rob, the awful strain over, and grown suddenly conscious of that pitiful, feeble figure toiling up the trail behind him. A gray-haired woman sank weakly on the hillside to pour out her heart in thanksgiving to her Maker, and it was there the young fellow found her when he turned back to lend her his stout support in retracing the steep path.

"Safe!"

The echo of the cry reached Armitage, but he gave it no heed. The Voice he had been so eagerly following had suddenly and mysteriously ceased. He hurried along the trail, oppressed by a vague fear, calling aloud, but receiving no answer. Had Song and Singer been nothing but a wild fancy, a fiction of imagination playing upon his sensitive hearing? Perplexed and wondering, he pressed forward, possessed only by a generous longing to be the first to lay his homage at the Singer's feet.

He had not far to go. At the widening of the trail as it crossed the summit he came to where a slight figure knelt, mute and helpless, now that the tense strain was over. Even before his groping hands touched her, he seemed to know her pre-

sence, and his face was transfigured with unselfish joy.

"The days of care and toil and anxiety have gone by for you. Now you have your crown again, with its shining jewel, Amy," he cried, rejoicing.

Her answer came so low and faint that he must fain stoop to hear it.

"But the manzanita berries are dearer!"

Armitage passed his hand over her head and face, and thus became conscious of her kneeling posture and of her wet cheeks.

"Why, Amy, what is this? Tears in the moment of triumph! Dear child, what is the matter?"

"The broken trail! I was watching you, and you were in such dreadful danger," she faltered. "There was a great hole washed in the path, and an awful fall below. You did not know. I was sure you were lost."

"And your tender heart went out to the blind man in his peril," he said, striving to divest the incident of any deeper meaning, and to take no advantage of her overwrought nerves. "I must be more careful hereafter, if by my heedlessness I run the risk of bringing such distress to my unselfish little friend."

He gently raised her to her feet, but she shivered and clung to him, so that he must fain support her on his strong arm.

"My little queen among women, you may now take your rightful place in the world again. Your rich gift is restored. Let me be the first to congratulate you."

Did her woman's intuition reveal the noble renunciation underlying his friendly words, or had the dread calamity that had drawn so near swept away the last vestige of affectation or reserve?

"It is worth nothing to me unless it brings help and comfort and happiness to you," she said softly. "When the hope first came, I cherished it for your sake. All the effort and all the joy have been for you. But if you no longer care" —

She made a faint attempt to free herself from his sustaining arm, but he held her to his heart, and all the world was suddenly glorified to his darkened eyes.

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